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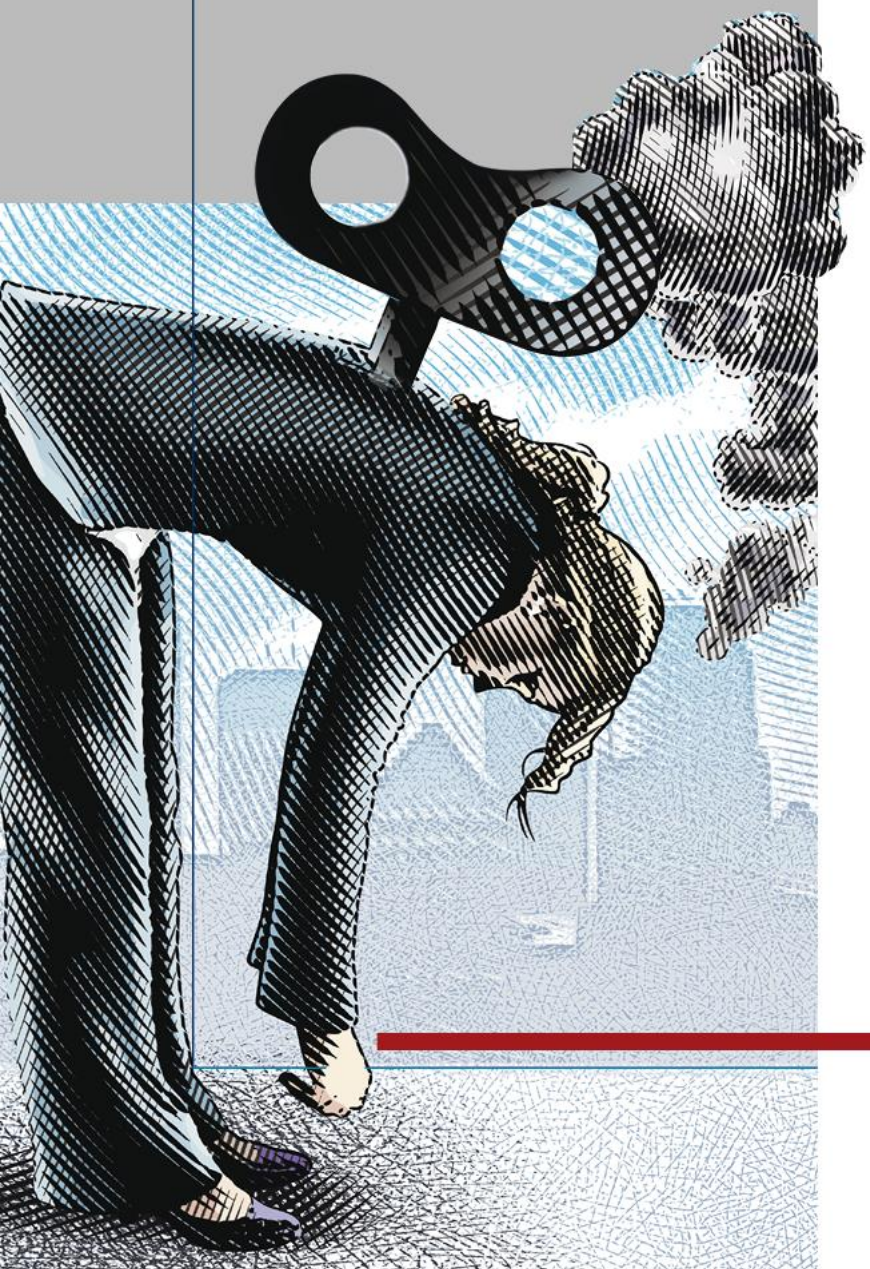
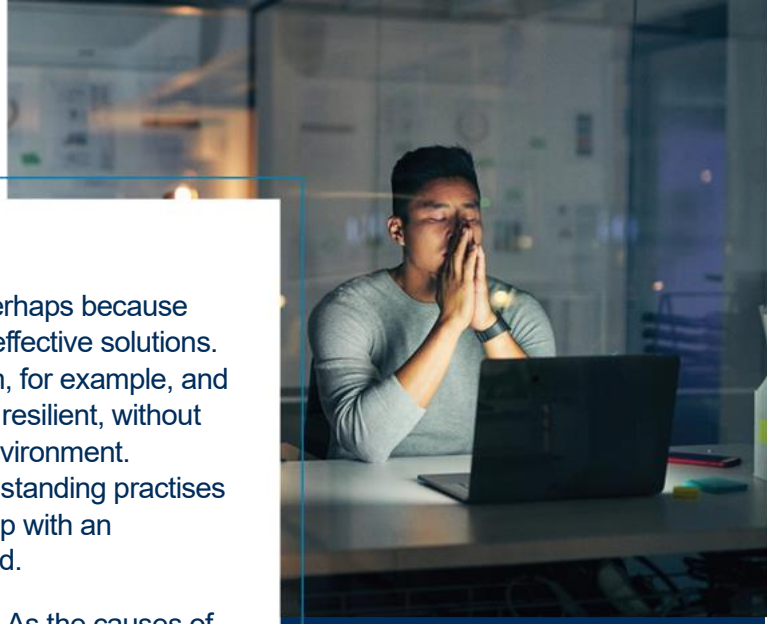
TACKLING THE **BURNOUT** PROBLEM



Workforce surveys around the world suggest that employee burnout – already a significant problem – may be getting worse. For employers, this can mean a costly drag on productivity. When workers are exhausted and emotionally distant from their jobs, they are unable to perform at their best and are more likely to make mistakes. They are also more likely to leave their jobs – draining the organisation of skills, knowledge and experience. Burnout at work can also affect all aspects of life, from health and relationships to career and finances.

Burnout is hardly a new phenomenon. It was identified as a workforce issue in the 1970s and has been studied since the early 1980s (Schaufeli, 2017). It has an even longer history under other names, such as industrial fatigue. Many employers have made efforts to address burnout, but the results have too often been disappointing.

WORKPLACE **OPTIONS**



Why is burnout such a difficult problem? Perhaps because many organisations have been applying ineffective solutions. They view burnout as an individual problem, for example, and focus on helping employees become more resilient, without making meaningful changes to the work environment. Perhaps the causes of burnout can be longstanding practises and habits of behaviour – sometimes tied up with an organisation's identity, where change is hard.

Recent research suggests a path forwards. As the causes of burnout have been identified, it's no coincidence that their opposites make up a menu of positive workplace characteristics. By looking at the causes of burnout and of sustainable engagement as levers of organisational change, leaders can use knowledge of burnout as a tool for focusing change efforts for the greatest transformational effect. Addressing burnout and building a high-performing organisation are two sides of the same coin.

WHAT IS BURNOUT?

One of the problems with 'burnout' as a descriptive term is its vagueness. Burnout is not a medical term or a condition with which an individual can be diagnosed. Another problem is the term's overuse in application to all aspects of life.

For this reason, high-quality research studies and workforce surveys begin with a definition of burnout. The most widely accepted is the one developed by Christina Maslach, who, with Susan Jackson, developed the first burnout assessment tool for organisations in 1981: the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). In their 2022 book, *The Burnout Challenge*, Maslach and Michael Leiter define burnout syndrome as

> an employee experience of a crushing *exhaustion*, feelings of *cynicism* and alienation and a sense of *ineffectiveness*. The burnout syndrome occurs when people experience combined crises on all three of these dimensions, most of the time. (p. 3)

The World Health Organization (WHO) used these same three dimensions when it defined burnout in 2019:

> Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterised by three dimensions:
>
> - feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
> - increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job
> - reduced professional efficacy

When people are asked in a survey to state whether they have experienced burnout at work, the results can be almost meaningless if a clear definition is not provided. What one person experiences as burnout, another might consider the normal tiredness that comes with a period of especially hard work. Another might feel frustration with work or lack of motivation and describe those feelings as burnout.

> Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.

That definition was included in the WHO's International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision (IDC11) in 2022. Both Maslach and the WHO take pains, however, to point out that burnout is not a disease or a condition. Rather, it is a syndrome related to chronic workplace stress. By making this distinction, they send the message that the problem of burnout does not lie with the individual but rather with the relationship between the individual and the conditions of their work. Helping an employee become more resilient may be an element in reducing the incidence of burnout, by making some employees more tolerant of stressful work conditions. But responsibility for burnout ultimately lies with the organisation, in addressing the sources of chronic stress in the work environment.

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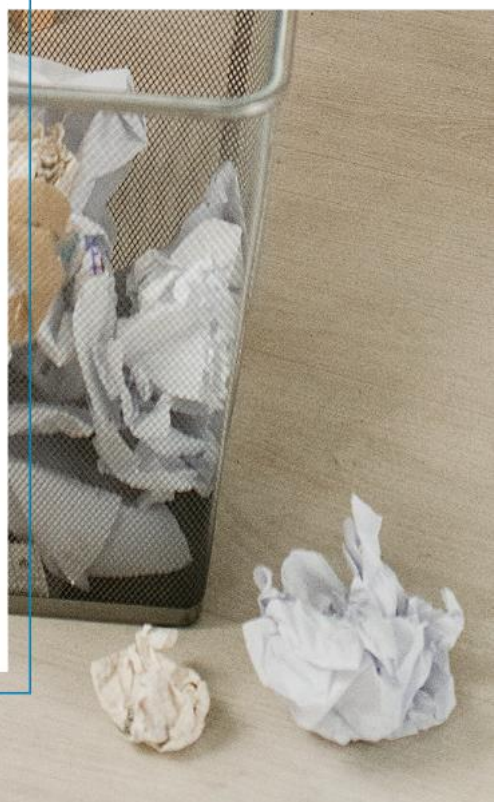
WHY EMPLOYEE BURNOUT IS A PROBLEM FOR ORGANISATIONS

Incidence of burnout

Workplace surveys showing high rates of employee burnout get a lot of media attention. Some report that more than half of employees have experienced burnout (Aflac, 2022; Asana, 2022; Business Health Institute, 2022; Deloitte, 2018). Survey results with these high numbers typically rely on the respondents to define burnout themselves. As noted above, individual definitions of burnout can vary, so the burnout percentages reported in these surveys must be taken with some scepticism.

Maslach and Leiter report that organisational surveys using the MBI generally show that between 10 and 15 per cent of employees experience all three of the dimensions of burnout most of the time (Maslach & Leiter, 2022, p. 53). Even these lower numbers are alarming and should serve as a wake-up call to organisations. If one in every ten workers feels exhausted, alienated and ineffective most of the time, that cannot be good for workforce productivity or customer service.

Other information from studies of workplace burnout should also be cause for concern. Younger workers are more likely than older workers to experience burnout, and women are more likely to experience burnout than men (Aflac, 2022; Asana, 2022; Business Health Institute, 2022; Deloitte, 2018; Future Forum, 2023).



Costs of burnout

Studies show a clear relationship between burnout and turnover, absenteeism and health care costs. Employees experiencing burnout are two to three times more likely to consider leaving their jobs. Work effectiveness is also affected. Error rates are higher when employees are exhausted and disengaged (Tawfik et al., 2018). Employees experiencing burnout are less confident in their work performance but are half as likely to discuss how to approach performance goals with their managers (Gallup, 2020).

The other side of this, of course, is the lost opportunity in not inspiring the full engagement, energy and creativity of workers and in not having employees at their best when performing critical tasks and serving the organisation's customers.

Legal requirements*

As the costs of workplace stress to organisations and their effects on population health become clearer, more countries are enacting laws and amending labour codes in ways that can make employers liable for work conditions that lead to chronic stress and, by extension, burnout.

- Most countries have protections in place that protect workers from excessive work hours and unsafe working conditions.
- Labour codes in many countries place a 'duty of care' responsibility on employers, which can make them liable if they ignore work conditions that are harmful to employees' physical, mental or emotional health.

Measures in some countries are more specific in protecting workers from conditions related to burnout.

- In France employees have the 'right to disconnect' from work during non-working hours, as do civil servants in Belgium (World Economic Forum, 2022). In Portugal, employees have a similar 'right to rest' (Ramos, 2022).
- In Belgium and Denmark, employers are required to assess the work environment for psychosocial risk and take necessary measures to prevent psychological and emotional harm, including burnout (European Trade Union Institute, 2021).

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO TO ADDRESS BURNOUT

Ask questions and listen to understand the employee experience

The first step in addressing burnout in an organisation is to understand the extent of the problem – which groups of employees are most affected and what factors in the work environment are causing chronic stress.

Talk to employees at all levels and in all roles to understand their work experiences. Have open conversations to learn what is challenging and what is satisfying about their jobs. Ask what gets in the way as they try to do their jobs well. Ask what frustrates them about work and what could make them more enthusiastic about coming to work every day.

Survey employees with specific questions to gauge the extent of workplace stress and burnout and their potential causes.

- Use an established survey tool to measure the incidence of burnout, with additional questions designed to reveal the characteristics of the work environment that might contribute to burnout.
- Allow respondents to share experiences in their own words. This qualitative information about conditions or situations that cause both stress and satisfaction is critical in understanding what is going well and what might need to be changed in the organisation.
- Share the results of the survey with employees. Surveying without sharing results can send the message that the organisation does not care what employees have to say. It is fine to own up to problems in an organisation even before you have plans for correcting them. It demonstrates transparency and honesty. Commit to working with employees on finding solutions, then follow through on that commitment.

Investigate the potential causes of burnout in the organisation

Several key causes of burnout have been identified by research. These should be considered when working to understand burnout in an organisation. Other factors might need to be considered, too, depending on the nature of the enterprise and its work environment. Known causes of burnout include:

Unmanageable workload: Hard work and high standards of excellence can be motivating, but unmanageable demands contribute to burnout. These include unreasonable time pressures; long work hours without breaks to rest and

recharge and work expectations that do not acknowledge family responsibilities and personal priorities outside of work. Work can also become unmanageable when tools and resources are inadequate; inefficient processes make work more difficult; adequate training is not provided and task priorities are unclear.

Lack of control: A sense of personal control is a factor in a person's perception of whether work is manageable and in their motivation to give their best effort. Micromanaging, lack of autonomy and rigid rules around when, where and how work gets done can all erode a worker's sense of control, contributing to feelings of burnout.

Insufficient rewards and recognition: Excessive work demands without intrinsic rewards or adequate compensation can contribute to burnout, as can financial rewards that are out of sync with effort and accomplishment. Social rewards and recognition are equally important. Good work that is not acknowledged with appreciation and thanks can lead to discouragement and frustration.

Lack of fairness: Favouritism, bias and discrimination in work assignments, rewards and advancement are noticed as slights by workers who are passed over—weakening their motivation and fuelling energy-draining resentment.

Lack of belonging: Employees who are not made to feel welcome and valued by their managers and colleagues can experience feelings of alienation and disconnection from the organisation. Isolation and lack of collaboration can also undermine a sense of belonging and make an employee more vulnerable to burnout.

Toxic work relationships: Incivility, harassment and discrimination – whether from colleagues or superiors – are amongst the most significant causes of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2022, p. 20; McKinsey, 2022, p. 4). Even in organisations where other factors are positive, toxic work relationships can cause high levels of burnout and push good employees to seek other jobs.

Misalignment of values: A mismatch between an employee's personal values and the values of the organisation, as the employee perceives them, can undermine an employee's motivation to contribute and lead to feelings of exhaustion. This can be a result of conflict between the employee's moral principles and the requirements of the job. Or it can stem from poor communication from leaders, leaving employees unaware of the organisation's values. Either way, the employee can be left without a sense of purpose or meaning in their work.

Micromanaging, lack of autonomy and rigid rules around when, where and how work gets done can all erode a worker's sense of control, contributing to feelings of burnout.

Demotivating leadership: Managers and higher-level leaders can motivate their employees – or they can have a demotivating effect that contributes to burnout. Leaders can contribute to burnout when they do not communicate well; do not inspire workers by connecting their work to larger goals; do not show curiosity about their employees' experience of work and do not show empathy or offer support to employees when needed.

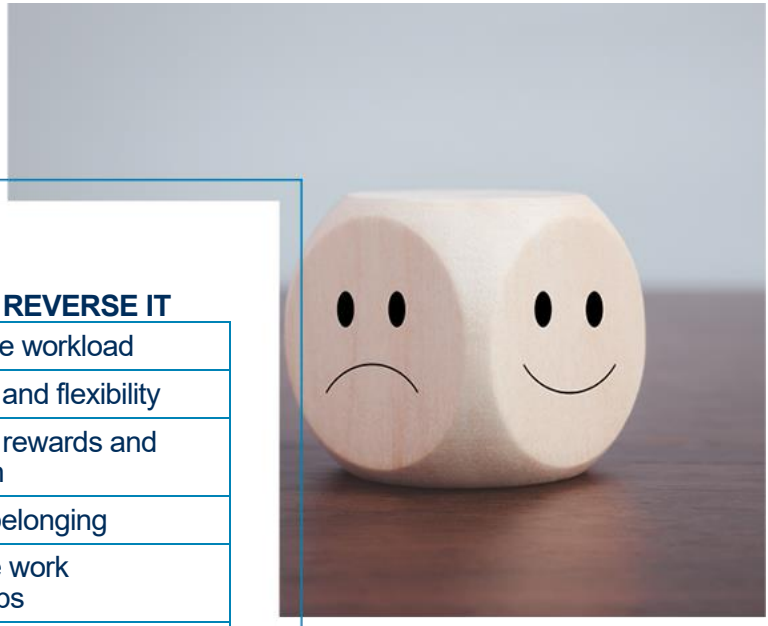
Lack of a supportive environment: When employees face challenges at work or in their lives outside of work, or when stress affects their mental health, support from managers, colleagues and other resources (including the employee assistance programme) can help them navigate the issues they are facing and stay on track. Without that support, employees are at greater risk of succumbing to burnout.

Look at the identified causes of burnout as potential levers for making positive organisational change

The list of potential causes of burnout can read as a formula for an unhealthy work environment. Identifying these kinds of problems in an employee survey or in conversations with employees can be discouraging. They can feel to leaders like harsh criticism or marks of failure.

But each of these causes of burnout have a positive counterpart. In taking action to address burnout, it can help to look at these negatives and positives as potential levers for making organisational change. This approach can help the organisation's leaders and employees focus together on a positive vision for a better future and take action to move in that direction.

The causes of burnout, as revealed in employee surveys and conversations, identify the current problems. Their positive counterparts hold potential solutions. Once you know the most significant causes of burnout in your organisation, look to their positive counterparts for ideas to address the problems and, in the process, transform the organisation. In this way, focusing on burnout can become a tool for making changes that will have the biggest impact on the organisation's work environment and future success.



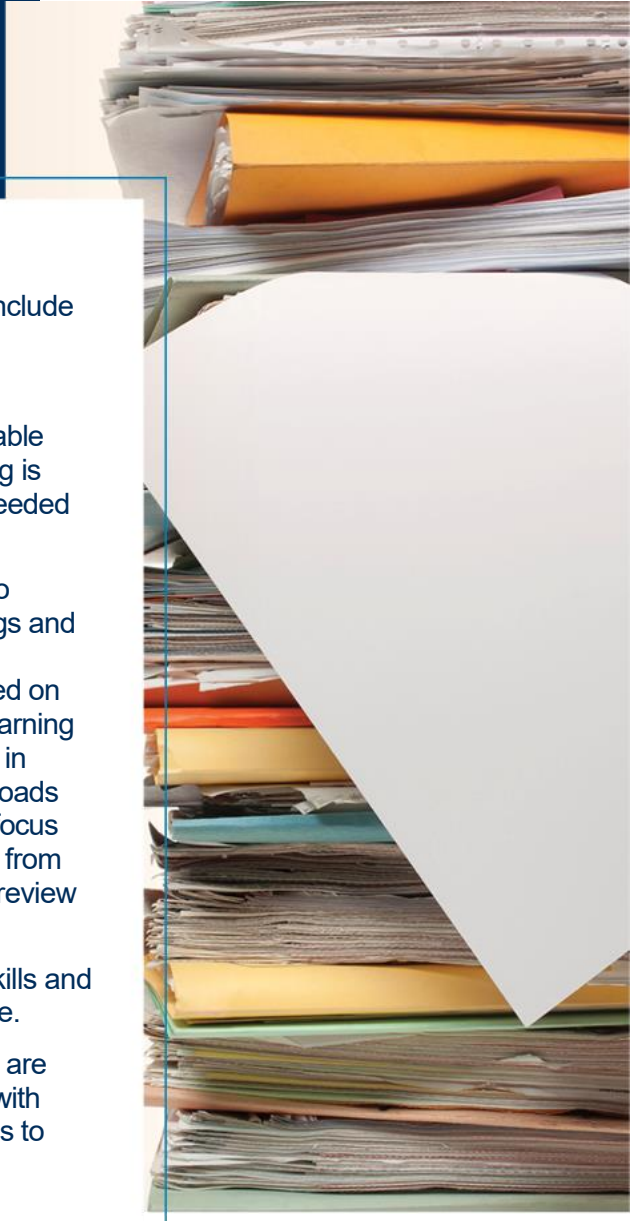
CAUSES OF BURNOUT	WAYS TO REVERSE IT
Unmanageable workload	Sustainable workload
Lack of control	Autonomy and flexibility
Insufficient rewards and recognition	Motivating rewards and recognition
Lack of belonging	Sense of belonging
Toxic work relationships	Supportive work relationships
Lack of fairness	Fair and respectful work practises
Misalignment of values	Values alignment
Unsupportive and demotivating leadership	Supportive and motivating leadership
Lack of a supportive environment	Supportive environment

To find a focus for addressing burnout, start with the information you have about the biggest causes of burnout in your organisation. Listen to the stories people tell and the examples they give of what causes them to experience stress and burnout. Then, work with employees to envision positive change. Ask them to imagine and describe a work environment where these negatives have been turned into positives – where obstacles to good work are removed, and they are motivated and have the energy to be at their best.

- What would that work environment look and feel like?
- How would work be done differently?
- What tools would be available?
- How would managers and colleagues talk and behave?
- How would people treat each other?
- How would excellent work be recognised and rewarded?
- What help would be available when employees struggle with a work task or an issue in their personal lives that affects their work?

Just as the causes of burnout are different in every organisation and amongst different groups and roles, so, too, the specifics of the positive states and the levers for positive change will vary from organisation to organisation and from group to group. There are no universal or cookie-cutter solutions for burnout.

Listen to the stories people tell and the examples they give of what causes them to experience stress and burnout.



Examples of positive states for each lever of change include the following:

Workload

- The organisation provides tools and training to enable employees to perform quality work efficiently. Hiring is managed to ensure sufficient staff with the skills needed for the work.
- Managers understand how much time is needed to accomplish tasks well, factoring in time for meetings and administrative work. They are clear in their work assignments and priorities. They assign work based on individual strengths and abilities and encourage learning and collaboration for personal growth. They check in regularly with team members and rebalance workloads and reprioritise as needed. They help employees focus on strategic high-value work and shift efforts away from reactive low-value tasks. They encourage regular review and redesign of work processes.
- Colleagues collaborate to share knowledge and skills and help each other when workloads are out of balance.
- Periods of intense or emotionally demanding work are balanced with opportunities to rest and recharge, with social support from colleagues and other resources to help in recovery.

Control

- The organisation designs jobs and provides tools and training to enable maximum autonomy as to how the work is done whilst providing clarity around goals and objectives. Policies allow for flexibility in where and when the work is done.
- Managers solicit employees' opinions and ideas and use that input when making decisions, setting priorities and improving work processes. Managers assign work tasks with clear expectations as to outcomes and appropriate skills training, giving employees appropriate autonomy in choosing how they do the work.
- Employees feel safe and are supported in pushing back against unreasonable work demands.

Rewards and recognition

- Pay is reasonable and financial rewards are designed to encourage high-quality, collaborative work.
- Social rewards, such as expressions of thanks and appreciation and public recognition for excellent work, are freely given in ways that employees find meaningful and motivating.

Colleagues collaborate to share knowledge and skills and help each other when workloads are out of balance.

Belonging

- Leaders express and model the importance of inclusion by listening to and showing their appreciation for the perspectives of others.
- Diversity and equity efforts are designed to foster a sense of inclusion. All employees are made to feel welcome and are valued for who they are.
- Employees have opportunities to work collaboratively, join affinity groups and participate with work colleagues in activities that build social connections and cohesion. Work colleagues show their appreciation for each other.

Work relationships

- Leaders express and model the importance of civility, respect and empathy in all work relationships, whether between managers and subordinates or between colleagues.
- Performance-management standards include civility, respect, empathy and collaboration, not just individual work output. Abusive or exclusionary words and behaviour are not tolerated, and intervention is prompt.

Fairness

- Processes are in place to minimise bias in hiring, compensation, work assignments and promotions.
- Leaders strive to be aware of their own biases and to avoid acting on them.
- The organisation provides clear and safe avenues for employees to draw attention to inequitable treatment.

Values

- The organisation's mission and values are communicated clearly through all levels and roles in ways that resonate with employees' personal values.
- The reality of work in the organisation aligns with its stated values.
- Managers ask questions and listen to employees to understand their values and motivations. Managers help employees recognise how their work contributes to larger objectives in ways that give their work meaning and purpose.

Leadership

- Leaders at all levels are selected, trained and regularly evaluated for the skills critical to employee wellbeing: clear communication, empathy, civility and self-regulation.
- Leaders work to build a psychologically safe environment where employee health and wellbeing are top priorities

CASE EXAMPLE: Addressing toxic work relationships

An Australian hospital, in response to government pressure on the health sector to address bullying and harassment, contracted with an expert facilitator to help work groups reporting breakdowns in work relationships. The facilitator used a process called Strengthening a Culture of Respect and Engagement (SCORE), designed to improve the social dynamics of a work group. The process begins with a baseline survey to understand the work group's culture. It then moves through five structured sessions, with three-week gaps between them to allow the group to practise changed behaviours. In the first session, ground rules are established and agreed to by all. By the fifth session, the group has learnt ways to interact with civility and respect and respond effectively to incidents of rudeness and disrespect. Post-session surveys showed significant positive changes in both civility and burnout. (Maslach & Leiter, 2022, p. 205)

and where employees feel safe in suggesting new ideas and drawing attention to problems.

- Leaders steer the organisation by values that employees find personally meaningful and communicate regularly to reinforce that alignment of values.

Supportive environment

- Managers and colleagues are supportive when employees face challenges at work or in their life outside of work. Training is provided to teach employees new skills and to help them be more effective in their work.
- Meaningful, effective and accessible support services are offered to employees through an employee assistance programme, including help in dealing with mental health issues and changing family responsibilities.

INDIVIDUAL RESILIENCE AND BURNOUT

Training, coaching and support can help employees cope with challenges at work and in their lives outside of work. The enhanced resilience and adaptability that comes from such support can make an important difference in individuals' ability to sustain engagement in difficult work environments. In one recent study, the most adaptable employees were much more likely than the least adaptable employees to report high work engagement, even in a toxic work environment. But the flip side of the data is telling. In a toxic work environment, almost half of the most adaptable employees were not highly engaged, and they were 60 per cent more likely than their less-adaptable peers to intend to leave their organisations. (McKinsey, 2022)

The upshot? Individual resilience and adaptability are important but not sufficient in efforts to reduce employee burnout. Employees can be trained and coached to be more resilient and adaptable and should certainly have access to support through an employee assistance programme to help them manage stress and navigate life challenges. An employee assistance programme can also help managers be more alert to the signs of stress and more aware of how their own actions can contribute to employee stress and disengagement or to sustainable engagement—but this is only part of the solution. The full range of conditions of work that are causing stress and burnout must also be addressed.

CASE EXAMPLE: The power of asking

In 2020, early in the pandemic, LinkedIn included a simple question at the end of an employee survey: 'How are you'? The thousands of comments told of burnout, isolation and anxiety, dealing with family responsibilities and missing social interactions with colleagues. In response, LinkedIn introduced LiftUp!, a series of initiatives that included a company-wide week off, a monthly no-meeting day, half-day Fridays in summer, support for parents and online events to lift employees' spirits. LiftUp! also included manager training on 'compassionate accountability' and 'practical prioritisation', and employee training on 'how to say "no" to managers'. Many of those initiatives have been so successful in reducing burnout and boosting engagement that they have been incorporated into LinkedIn's benefits and practises. (Kim, 2022; Vasel, 2021)

TAKE ACTION IN EXPERIMENTAL STEPS

With the involvement of people at all levels of the organisation, experiment with specific actions to move the levers of organisational change away from burnout and towards engagement and success. What those first experimental steps will be will depend on what causes of stress and burnout have been identified, what parts of the organisation are ready to start the journey of change and what actions seem likely to have the biggest impact.

Because burnout has many driving causes and because each broad cause can have many elements, no single change step is likely to be sufficient. Your organisation might need to experiment with many changes. You might take on several change experiments at the same time, in different parts of the organisation, if you have the capacity. Or you might start with just one change experiment to get a sense of what is involved.

Once you get started, keep going. Experiment, evaluate results and refine and expand your efforts. Use positive results to strengthen the engagement of leaders and employees in change efforts. Addressing burnout by moving the levers of organisational change is an ongoing effort. The reward? Healthier, more engaged people and a more successful organisation.

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