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Where There's Smoke, There's Fire: Recognizing the Signs of Burnout

“I never want to hear the word ‘burnout’ again!” shouted a C-suite executive.

We were having yet another return to office discussion in mid-2021, when we hoped the pandemic was finally over. Little did we know then that we still had many cycles ahead of us.

In my role as the global chief people officer, I was in the process of sharing internal and external employee data with the executive leadership team, highlighting the profound mental and physical strain the global pandemic inflicted on our workforce.

Additionally, we were trying to get our heads around the challenges of the Great Resignation, a phenomenon of massive employee resignations across every department and global office. These hurdles had managers struggling to fill vacancies and motivate employees, including themselves, as they barely hung by a thread.

I was frustrated and responded, “You can call it whatever you want, but that doesn’t change the reality that our employees, especially our managers, are feeling unsafe, exhausted, and disconnected. Ignoring it won’t solve the issue.”

While that might not have been my finest hour, I wasn’t wrong.

Breaking Down Burnout: Where There’s Smoke There’s Fire

Have you ever fought the urge to sneak out of a meeting momentarily, find a quiet corner, and unleash a silent scream into the void?

Have you ever found yourself drowning in a sea of employee complaints, desperately trying to stifle the urge to tell everyone to shut up?

Have you ever daydreamed about who you might be if you were burnout-free?

I have.

Visualize a version of yourself that radiates with inner light, peacefully sleeping or taking a leisurely walk in the park, instead of a you who struggles to recall not just breakfast but also the last time you savored a delicious homemade meal or shared a laugh with loved ones. It’s an enticing vision, right?

Yet the relentless grind of work often clouds our dreams, making it challenging to spot the hidden triggers and subtle warnings of burnout, let alone fathom its deep-seated consequences.

In this chapter, you’ll sharpen your awareness about what burnout really is—and what it is not.

Let’s begin.

My Burnout Story

I’ve been burned out more times than I care to remember.

Burnout starts somewhere, and it varies from person to person. For me, it began as far back as I can remember.

My upbringing in the Dominican Republic—cared for by grandparents who had endured a brutal dictatorship, were compelled to leave their homeland to raise young children in a foreign country, and eventually returned as older parents to their first granddaughter—instilled within me a deep sense of maturity and responsibility from a very early age.

I not only imposed high expectations on myself to excel and be a “good girl”—whether at school, family gatherings, or social events—but also

learned to suppress my own discomfort and prioritize others' needs over my own. This, regrettably, led to my failure to establish healthy boundaries and effective coping mechanisms to manage conflict and stress. My coping methods revolved around performance, maintaining a constant smile, and disregarding emotional and physical warning signals.

It turns out, I'm not alone.

For the past two decades, I've been at the forefront of revolutionizing people practices in some of the world's most esteemed companies. Occasionally, burnout episodes would wreck my patience and health despite my ninja-level skill in sidestepping and dismissing the unwelcomed, ill-mannered guests.

A catalyzing moment arrived in 2018 when I took an involuntary 11-month sabbatical due to an organizational restructuring. At the guidance of a friend and executive coach, I approached this career break as an opportunity to rest and heal my heart, which I had long neglected. I refer to this period of my life as "The Year of My Heart."

Initially, I was concerned about how this career break might impact my professional reputation and appeal to potential employers. I didn't know anyone who had ever taken career breaks. However, it became evident that this break was exactly what my heart needed.

I found joy, connection, and freedom. I took my family on far-off travel adventures, dedicated more of my time to nonprofit board and volunteer work, and cultivated a more expansive vision for my career. This experience eventually led me to the role of chief people officer at Vice Media at the onset of a global health pandemic.

While I had intended to carry my newfound learnings into my new work life, life had its unexpected twists in store.

During the COVID-19 crisis, my primary focus revolved around guiding global teams through what seemed like an endless health emergency. My daily routine was marked by providing emotional support to peers, teammates, and colleagues, offering a compassionate ear for their concerns. All the while, I grappled with an overwhelming array of work challenges that spanned nearly every time zone, crossed cultural and geographic boundaries, and encompassed both personal and operational domains, often without a guidebook. Balancing the standard HR function of recruitment, retention, and growth practices with emerging facilities concerns, reentry processes, and interpersonal tensions, and health and

well-being crises that constantly popped up across teams kept my to-do list on a heavy rotation.

This tumultuous hamster wheel speed eventually propelled me down a path of prolonged burnout, an experience unlike any I had encountered in my career.

The causes of my burnout were clear: managing global teams in a 24/7 environment, shouldering the responsibility of guiding managers overseeing their respective teams, and supporting executive leaders overseeing the entirety of it all. My professional load was further compounded by the challenges of parenting a teenager and striving to be a good wife. However, as a Latina, it didn't stop there; I also attempted, and frequently fell short, to fulfill my roles as a daughter, granddaughter, sister, cousin, niece, and aunt, not to mention a friend.

It felt like my mind was constantly aflame, with every call, text, or email setting off my nervous system. But I just kept going, not making room for rest.

It wasn't just *my* burnout that needed addressing. I was also responsible for the collective burnout felt by teams worldwide, the complex operational puzzle that management and leadership teams had to untangle as a consequence, and the deep well of empathy we had to draw from while navigating uncharted waters.

Caught in this vicious cycle of performance, adjustment, adaptation, and change, I failed to notice my gradual decline in functioning. Externally, I continued to meet corporate expectations, sustaining a high level of performance. However, the relentless stressors silently eroded my mental faculties, making me feel like a sluggish sloth attempting to navigate life in perpetual slow motion.

The chronic stress I experienced also wreaked havoc on my physical well-being. Seemingly simple actions like getting up from my chair became painful, my weight and gut health spiraled into disarray, and I grappled with persistent rashes and inflammation that left me feeling like my body was aflame. I even found myself constantly scratching my skin, needing to hide the unsightly rashes.

As a child, I was that kid with an ever-present runny nose, sitting in front of the TV because any other activity felt too arduous. Asthma and recurrent bouts of respiratory illnesses were my constant companions. As an adult, the vivid childhood memories of struggling to breathe inspired me to lead a healthy lifestyle, engaging in physical activities, especially running, to strengthen my lungs.

However, after contracting COVID-19 in April 2021, I began experiencing familiar and debilitating respiratory symptoms, which were diagnosed as either long-term COVID-19 or chronic bronchitis, depending on which medical opinion I listened to. This time, my age and heightened stress levels contributed to further debilitation. My physical and emotional reserves were depleted thanks to the relentless barrage of professional challenges pummeling me since 2020. It felt like I had completed a grueling marathon filled with unexpected twists and turns, leaving me feeling fractured, worn, and constantly struggling to catch my breath. In my quest to find relief and breathe more easily, I consulted numerous specialists and tried various treatments.

A pulmonologist concluded that I was no longer asthmatic but highly susceptible to bronchial and respiratory infections, a vulnerability exacerbated as I neared my 50s. An acupuncturist treated the muscle pain and tightness in my chest. I also engaged in personal weight training to address the bloating and weight gain I couldn't shake.

Contemplating the possibility of perimenopause and a change in my diet to address the skin irritation, I also consulted a nutritionist. Upon testing my blood, her unequivocal diagnosis was that my hormone levels were at the lowest end of the spectrum for someone my age. Curious, I asked, "What do you think might be causing this?" Her response was swift and direct: "Sustained stress." The sobering reality of her words left me profoundly shaken.

"What in the world is sustained stress?" I wondered, diving into the rabbit hole of definitions.

Sustained stress, or chronic stress, is when your mind and body are in a never-ending tug-of-war, stretched to their limits. According to the American Psychological Association, it's the kind of tension that just won't quit, thanks to ongoing stressors like work dramas, financial troubles, relationship roller coasters, health upheavals, or even environmental shenanigans. And guess what? Chronic stress isn't just a minor inconvenience; it's the sneakily harmful troublemaker that messes with your mental and physical well-being.¹

Adding fuel to the cauldron of my burnout, as I dedicated myself entirely to work, I unintentionally distanced myself from the people who cared about me the most, intensifying the toll that burnout exacted on my life.

I felt disoriented and perpetually fatigued, trapped in a relentless activity loop without the rest and replenishment that my body craved. I was burnt crispy and I neglected it for far too long.

Workplace burnout is real, a pressing challenge in work environments worldwide. However, it's something we can both prevent and manage effectively.

But first let me explain what burnout is—and what it isn't.

What Burnout Is Not

Bad days at work, though unwelcome, are an inevitable aspect of professional life. Commuting delays, printer malfunctions, Wi-Fi outages, annoying coworkers, and time-consuming administrative tasks can be frustrating, but they come with the territory of work. While these common workplace irritations might provoke negative emotions and grumbles, they're usually tolerable with a touch of good-natured griping and old-fashioned patience.

But they're not signs of burnout.

Even in well-managed organizations, work isn't always neatly distributed. Urgent client needs, unexpected market developments, and economic fluctuations can disrupt the balance. Crunch periods of concentrated efforts to meet specific, unforeseen objectives can be demanding. However, if they are brief, sporadic, and thoughtfully managed, they need not have a lasting negative impact.

A study by Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter estimated that 10% to 15% of employees exhibit signs of extreme burnout. The majority, however, fall into four other work experience categories: overextended, ineffective, disengaged, and positively engaged, with the latter being the most common at about 30%. This suggests that over half of the workforce might be treading in a precarious stress zone. While not in the critical area of burnout, they could be inching closer to it, balancing on the edge of one or two stressful workplace dimensions.²

My colleague's outburst mentioned earlier was partly influenced by the idea that workers toss out the term "burnout" as a weapon against the everyday workplace nuisances we all encounter. Burnout may not have the best reputation in leadership circles, but dismissing its significance is misguided, and it keeps you from building self-awareness and compassion at work.

Real workplace burnout is tightly linked to one's job and packs a more substantial punch than the routine tensions and annoyances on the job.

If you're feeling burned out by talk of burnout, you're not alone.

So What Is Burnout?

While it's tempting to think we coined the term "burnout" in the 2020s, did you know that the concept of organizational burnout originated in the 1970s? Yet it wasn't until 2019 that the World Health Organization, in its International Classification of Diseases, defined "workplace" burnout as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed and classified.³

Cait Donovan, the host of *Fried: The Burnout Podcast*, offers another definition of burnout: "the slow decline of normal functioning in every aspect of life that happens due to chronic stress."⁴ When she first shared this definition with me, I had an immediate and visceral reaction. It left me momentarily speechless as its familiarity struck a chord deep within me. I instantly reproached myself for neglecting, fighting against, and denying the signs of burnout in nearly every role I held. Just as quickly I realized that this self-criticism was counterproductive and had contributed to my own experience of burnout.

Burnout is a tricky monster.

What Are the Signs of Burnout?

Simply put, burnout at work is characterized by persistent feelings of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy resulting from overwhelming job-related stressors. That coworker known for their collaborative demeanor who recently snapped at you when you asked for a last-minute favor? That could be a sign of burnout. The moment in a meeting when you temporarily blanked on your colleague from Singapore's name until someone mentioned it? That, too, could be indicative of burnout. When your usual rest periods, including work breaks, weekends, and time off, feel more like "meh" than refreshment and replenishment. Additionally, when you struggle to differentiate between a genuine offense and someone simply misspeaking, these could be signs of burnout.⁵

Another sign of burnout? The Sunday Scaries.

As far back as I can remember, my aunt Maritza, a retired schoolteacher turned administrator, had an aversion to Sundays. It became a recurring family joke that we knew not to disturb her or invite her to family gatherings

on Sundays. If you inquired about the reason, she would say, “I despise Sundays. If I’m too active on a Sunday, my Monday becomes unbearable, setting the tone for the entire week. I need to emotionally prepare myself for returning to work. I also hate Mondays.”

The term “Sunday Scaries” describes the heightened stress and unease individuals experience as they anticipate the upcoming workweek. This can result in physical symptoms like headaches, anxiety, stomachaches, and depression. And it can manifest, as it did with my aunt, in social separation.

LinkedIn has been conducting surveys since 2018 to explore the well-known phenomenon called the Sunday Scaries. According to their data, there has been a rise in prework anxiety among workers, affecting 75% of respondents, particularly Millennials and Gen Z.⁶

In 2022, the Meditation app Headspace also uncovered a concerning statistic: almost 30% of its users struggle with sleepless nights on nearly four evenings a week, mainly due to the fear of job loss.

Dr. Dana Udall, the chief clinical officer of Headspace Health, explains, “Research has shown a correlation between economic uncertainty and stress, so this concept isn’t necessarily new. However, what is unique in today’s current environment is the compound effect of multiple global crises coming to a head at once—the global pandemic, political unrest, rising inflation, and economic instability to name a few. All of these factors can impact how we show up in the workplace—and ultimately our overall mental health.”⁷

When managing the Sunday Scaries, their recommendations are grounded in self-care, such as ensuring adequate sleep, setting boundaries to shield against work-related emails and weekend distractions, practicing mindfulness and meditation, fostering gratitude, and seeking therapy. Taking breaks from the news and work when necessary are also helpful ways to reduce the Sunday Scaries.

What else could help? Getting clear on personal goals and celebrating achievements, which can lead to regaining motivation and purpose at work. And if none of that works, try planning your Monday schedules, easing into the week instead of jumping to a stressful Monday discussion with difficult coworkers, and creating opportunities for connection with coworkers who can lighten your spirits and offer support.^{8,9}

While these coping mechanisms can benefit many, they often fall short of addressing the underlying causes of this overwhelming feeling. We frequently try to tackle work-related stress by urging individuals to enhance their resilience, all the while overlooking the fact that it’s a systemic problem

demanding a comprehensive solution. Regardless of the coping strategies employed, they cannot alleviate the Sunday Scaries stress deeply rooted in working conditions.

Based on research by Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter and the World Health Organization, these are the three dimensions of workplace burnout:

- Sustained feelings of exhaustion: Feelings of energy depletion or emotional exhaustion
- Depersonalization: increased mental withdrawal from one's work and pessimistic or cynical feelings toward one's work
- Professional inefficacy: reduced sense of efficacy, even failure, at work¹⁰

Why Workplace Burnout Matters

Ever heard of the Great Resignation, the Big Quit, or the Great Reshuffle that swept through the workforce in the early 2020s, with a mass exodus of employees across various industries? While the COVID-19 pandemic led to nonstop, overwhelming work demands, various long-established workplace conditions have exacerbated the difficulty in retaining talent.

Burnout isn't just significant as a psychological outcome; it's also tied to how dedicated people are to their jobs, careers, effort, relationships, and adaptability to organizational changes.

Decades of research shows an association between workplace burnout and a host of negative organizational, psychological, and even physical consequences, including:

Organizational

- Absenteeism
- Job dissatisfaction
- Presenteeism

Psychological

- Depression
- Insomnia
- Psychological distress¹¹

Physical

- Heart disease
- Headaches
- Musculoskeletal pain¹²

Burnout Risk Factors

What complaints do workers have about the workplace, and are they valid? According to Maslach, Leiter, and Jackson, the main factors driving workplace stress and burnout include:

1. Unsustainable workload
2. Perceived lack of control
3. Insufficient rewards for effort
4. Lack of a supportive community
5. Lack of fairness
6. Mismatched values and skills¹³

Anyone who has ever had a job has likely encountered several of these situations, at least occasionally. These experiences often serve as amusing material for TV shows and films that depict people feeling worn out or fed up with work. Consider, for instance, the comically cringeworthy work scenarios portrayed in iconic TV shows and movies like *The Office*, *Mad Men*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, and *Office Space*.

Cait Donovan's Holistic View of Burnout Factors

Cait Donovan has crafted a comprehensive framework that extends beyond the workplace model of Maslach, Leiter, and Jackson. It's a masterfully woven web of modern, interconnected factors, painting a rich picture of what contributes to the risk of burnout. She categorizes these factors through a lens of holistic insight, breaking them down as follows:

1. **Work:** Encompasses elements such as workload, limited autonomy, absence of a supportive community, inequality and unfairness, lack of praise and recognition, a misalignment of values,¹⁴ plus a deficiency of psychological safety within the workplace

2. **Culture (primarily in the United States):** Includes the glorification of hard work, emphasis on individualism, relentless pursuit of achievement, conformity to gender roles, the presence of various ‘isms’ such as racism, sexism, anti-LGBTQIA discrimination, ableism, and so on, and the impact of advertising and marketing on societal values
3. **Family:** Includes intergenerational trauma, unexamined familial value systems, cultural pressures within families, situations where children take on parental roles (parentified children), the presence or absence of psychological safety within familial relationships, attachment styles, and the presence of chronically ill family members
4. **Self:** Includes traits and behaviors such as perfectionism, the tendency to prioritize others over oneself (people-pleasing), challenges in setting and maintaining boundaries, difficulty seeking support, an overwhelming sense of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency, the absence of clearly defined personal values, and the presence of trauma
5. **Health:** Includes chronic illnesses, mental health disorders, the influence of genetics and epigenetics, traumatic brain injuries, and dietary factors
6. **Environment:** Encompasses the lack of access to green spaces, limited exposure to natural light at dawn and dusk, feelings of physical insecurity at the neighborhood or home level, the presence or absence of beauty in one’s surroundings both indoors and outdoors, and the availability of a supportive community¹⁵

Cait Donovan’s model is the ultimate “connect-the-dots” puzzle, explaining where all these complex factors intermingle and can lead to burnout. To her expanded list we can also add relationships with money, immigrant status, and countless others. It’s as if life decided to play a little game of “Let’s see how many ways we can stress you out!” But, in all seriousness, her well-researched insight is a powerful reminder of the need to comprehend the intricacy and breadth of factors that impact our well-being and those under our care. This understanding allows us to protect it and potentially keep burnout at arm’s length.

So What About Managers?

This book is designed for managers who wear the hats of task-mastering, vision-guiding, and human-caring. To manage a top-performing team, you must steer tasks in the right direction while infusing your approach with strategic vision, expansive thinking, and a focus on human-centric care.

However, here's the twist. You won't succeed unless you're attuned to the signs of burnout, both for yourself and your crew. Achieving the right balance between your responsibilities and the well-being of your team is all part of the daily grind.

"Daisy, I want you to know that I appreciate your efforts in writing these manager notes, but honestly, they're not making much of a difference," said a mid-level manager to me one day. This conversation unfolded after I had sent out numerous manager Q&A documents aimed at helping managers prepare for the myriad questions and concerns their employees might have as we geared up to return to the office.

As the pandemic began, we recognized that managers were on the frontlines, bearing the weight of responsibility for their teams, clients, and audiences. They had an outsized burden to provide care, direction, and information during these uncertain times. In response, my team and I created "Manager FAQs" for various critical events to support them. These FAQs covered a wide array of topics, including our responses to racial crisis events, the health crisis, the future of work, media reports on our company's financial status, available resources, and our extensive measures, initiated in response to COVID-19, to ensure a safe return to the office.

These FAQs were designed to guide discussions, but as this manager pointed out, they fell short in addressing the increasing demands from their own managers and employees. She continued, "I'm burned out. I haven't been able to fill all the positions I need on my team. There's no assurance that we won't experience another round of layoffs. Plus, we're not offering sufficient incentives for people to return to the office. No set of FAQs can assist me in convincing my team to come back."

I was at a loss for answers. She was right. What she laid out were all the operational blockers that I couldn't solve for, and neither could she. No amount of scripts could help.

Managers serve as the linchpins in shaping the work environment, influencing team dynamics, and setting the tone for a balanced work-life culture. To successfully handle their responsibilities and achieve the organization's goals within their team context, managers must foster trust, loyalty, and motivation, all while boosting engagement, job satisfaction, and productivity. They need a toolkit with specialized influence, empathy, and relationship-building skills. Gone are the days of the old-school "do as I say because I said so" command and control mantra. Try instructing a Gen Zer to meet a project deadline without providing context and using an intimidating and fear-inducing tone. Good luck with that.

Managers face heightened workloads as we navigate the turbulent 2020s, marked by waves of restructuring, layoffs, and budget cuts in almost every sector. This surge is not just a byproduct of the usual challenges; it stems from adapting to ever-changing workflows, integrating new technologies, and operating with smaller teams under tight budgets. They're also steering through the twists and turns of new hybrid work models and enforcing return-to-office policies, often at odds with employee preferences.

Considering the mounting challenges inherent in this role, it's not surprising that managers often retreat into their silos, become isolated from colleagues across the organization, and experience higher rates of burnout and disengagement than their team members. When they are unable to receive and provide the necessary support, they inadvertently contribute to both their own and their team's burnout.

So, what can a manager do?

Gallup's 2023 State of the Global Workforce, an annual survey that helps determine employed adults' day-to-day emotional experiences at work, found that job unhappiness is at a staggering all-time high. Fifty-nine percent of people reported being emotionally detached at work, 44% as stressed at work, and 21% feeling anger. Only 23% reported feeling engaged—which is at an all-time low.¹⁶

The study's findings reveal that worker dissatisfaction isn't solely tied to the number of hours worked, work-life balance, or the workplace setting. Surprisingly, worker disengagement increases for remote and four-day week workers, while stress levels rise for those working in-person and on a

five-day schedule. The nature of one's work schedule and location matter to a worker's well-being but doesn't tell the whole story—workers can experience unhappiness regardless of whether they're at home or in the office, working 30-hour or 60-hour weeks.

Gallup research further revealed that 55% of managers are exploring new roles, compared to 49% of individual contributors.¹⁷ This leads to a question: How can organizations alleviate manager burnout, enhance their ability to lead effectively, and encourage their retention?

What matters, and has always mattered, is how individuals experience their work—particularly how they are managed, coached, and treated.

Lousy managers equal lousy work vibes.

According to Gallup, your manager or team leader is like the DJ of team engagement, responsible for a whopping 70% of the groove. In other words, how folks feel about their daily grind matters more in stress reduction than their seat location. So to combat the prevalent job grumbles, zombie-mode workdays, and burnout, we need workplace sherpas, not just comfy chairs. Gallup estimates that low engagement costs the global economy US\$8.8 trillion, about 9% of global GDP.¹⁸

Takeaways from Gallup:

1. In most companies today, your people are just warming seats, not owning the stage. Ignoring these “meh” employees means ignoring a key driver of keeping customers and achieving growth.
2. Let's set the record straight: employee engagement isn't about turning your office into a happiness spa. You're missing the engagement boat if your metrics only measure employee contentment. Real engagement means your people are mentally dialed in. They know the score, have what they need, and have a supportive workplace community, perhaps even a best friend at work, a rockstar manager, and a mission they believe in.
3. Those silent quitters on your payroll? They're the ripest fruit on the productivity tree, ready to be plucked if you treat and coach them right. The worldwide average is about one engaged employee for every one sleepwalking colleague. But Gallup found that, among their top-ranked companies, it's a staggering 18 to one. Big or small, these workplaces feel different.

What's a Manager to Do?

Research conducted by Humu, a platform dedicated to driving organizational behavioral change, has uncovered a troubling statistic: one in three employees experiences anxiety while at work. Just think about it—a third of your workforce is grappling with stress!¹⁹ It's no wonder that, as revealed in Gallup's 2023 report, 59% of employees are quietly disengaging, a phenomenon referred to as “quiet quitting.” These individuals are psychologically detached from their employers, exerting minimal effort, and are more likely to experience stress and burnout as they grapple with feelings of disconnection and disappointment from their workplace.

Research indicates that when we understand the root causes of burnout in our workplaces, whether they relate to specific workplace challenges or the nature of work itself, we can identify systemic solutions that can help mitigate or avoid these symptoms for workers and organizations.

Let's delve into work-related burnout conditions one by one and explore potential solutions, deepening our understanding of ourselves and the strategies we can employ to alleviate or extinguish them.

Excessive Workload and Expectations

Problem: This one's the universal troublemaker wreaking havoc on everyone. A key contributor to burnout is the relentless pressure to cope with overwhelming workloads and impractical expectations, often compounded by reluctance or apprehension to explore alternative methods to meet these demands.

Ever had that sinking feeling when someone innocently asks, “What's your work schedule like today?” The mental math alone can make your stomach churn. While our inner voices may be urging us to stop and take a break, our performance-driven instincts push us to keep going at full throttle. It's a symptom of our ingrained culture of overwork, where long hours, juggling multiple roles (including the often invisible work or “the job within the job”), and the relentless pursuit of unattainable goals have become the new normal.²⁰

Try This:

- **Explain the “Why” and “What”:** Transparency requires a level of courage and generosity that we sometimes fail to offer. Fostering genuine connections within teams is essential in a dynamic, fast-paced

setting where priorities are constantly evolving. When making decisions that shift a team's goals, share the rationale behind those decisions and reassign tasks as needed. Encourage team members to ask clarifying questions to ensure everyone understands roles and responsibilities, and core requirements.²¹

- **Offer Meaningful Growth Opportunities:** Don't just pay lip service to psychological safety; genuinely listen and believe your people. Work hard at creating an environment where every employee feels at ease when asking for assistance or proposing the elimination of unnecessary tasks to alleviate their workloads. Foster a culture that encourages employees to brainstorm potential solutions. Provide support for their experimentation to determine which ideas are most effective. Nurture their personal and professional development, steering clear of expecting them to wear a "superhero cape." Above all, guarantee that speaking up will not lead to negative repercussions, shame, or disconnection.

Lack of Control and Autonomy

Problem: Not having a voice or control in work matters directly impacting you can take a toll on your well-being. Unfortunately, traditional workplaces have often restricted worker autonomy. Employees subject to micromanagement or constrained decision-making authority are at a heightened risk of burnout. Despite research highlighting micromanagement, restricted decision-making, and a lack of control as substantial predictors of burnout, managers who distrust their employees or impede their ability to make valuable contributions persist in extinguishing their employees' aspirations and enthusiasm.²²

Try This:

- **Guide Without Overwhelming:** When your team members run into roadblocks, think twice before swooping in to save the day, even if it might seem tempting. While well-intentioned guidance is undoubtedly important, an excess of suggestions on how to perform a task can come across as micromanagement, complete with the eye-rolling reaction. Instead, consider posing open-ended questions, such

as “What are you trying to solve for?” “How would you propose tackling this challenge?” or “What potential follow-up questions do you foresee from the client or your colleagues?” This approach empowers team members to contribute their lived experience perspectives, granting them the agency we all desire. It also helps avoid execution errors, as they are frequently the ones closest to the solutions.

- **Spread Leadership:** Now, please don't give me a side eye here. The objective is to empower team members to assume leadership roles and responsibilities at various organizational levels. Think back to your career's early days and how being entrusted with a special assignment boosted your confidence and sense of competence. Encourage team members to share their perspectives on which tasks to tackle and how to execute them efficiently. Delegate authority and place trust in your team to make decisions, recognizing that their choices may diverge from your own without necessarily being incorrect. When mistakes occur, provide support and guide them toward solutions rather than imposing soul-crushing directives. Spreading leadership across your team is like chicken soup for the soul.

Inadequate Work-Life Balance

Problem: Thanks to technology, the line that used to separate work and personal life has become about as clear as a smudged whiteboard. The constant connectivity through smartphones and the rise of remote work has made it impossible for folks to switch off from their jobs. Sure, technology makes everything easier and more accessible, but with that accessibility comes the pesky sidekick of 24/7 direct contact and demands that erase the once-distinct borders between your time and everyone else's. A study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* gave us the data to back this up, showing that those struggling with maintaining a work-life balance are more likely to find themselves singing the burnout blues.²³

Try This:

- **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Encouraging flexible work schedules or well-balanced remote work alternatives hands the reins back to employees when managing their time. Numerous studies have

shown that flexible work arrangements are a game-changer. They bring the magic trifecta of improved work-life balance, professional growth, and job satisfaction.

These benefits extend beyond employees and positively impact managers and organizations as well. When flexible work options are available, encouraged, and well-balanced among team, managers find it easier to engage, recruit, retain, and enhance productivity.

Moreover, it's a win-win for the employees in flexible work situations, who can better prioritize their tasks based on their peak focus and energy hours. The result? A boost to efficiency and job performance.²⁴

- **Set Boundaries:** Setting and maintaining clear boundaries not only liberates you from frustrations and miscommunications but also contributes to a healthier, more joyful, and respectful work environment.

Your team or colleagues may look to you for stability, courage, and wisdom, but it's essential to remember that your time, energy, and attention are finite resources. You can take simple steps like turning off work-related notifications outside of working hours or consider instituting policies that discourage after-hours emails and meetings for nonessential work matters. Remember that you set the tone for these boundaries, and openly sharing your needs and preferences makes it more likely for others to follow suit.

In her article “How to Set Healthy Boundaries When Starting a New Job,” Melody Wilding advises taking into account various aspects of your work-life balance, including:

- The start and end times of your workday
- Response times for emails and messages
- Calendar blocks for focused work or “no meeting” time
- The frequency and duration of breaks during the day
- Resource or training requirements necessary for your job
- The type of work that aligns with your preferences and bandwidth²⁵

In “A Guide to Setting Better Boundaries,” Joe Sanok suggests committing to boundaries for at least one quarter and assessing your experience with both qualitative and quantitative measures.

You can use the following questions to track your progress:

- What positive outcomes have resulted from the boundaries I've set?
- Have there been any negative consequences associated with these boundaries?
- How do I feel now compared to how I felt at the outset of implementing these boundaries?
- What adjustments or changes are necessary to stay on course and address any negative outcomes?
- Which boundaries are non-negotiable (hard boundaries), and which are more flexible and aspirational (soft boundaries)?²⁶

Low Levels of Management and Leadership Support

Problem: The core of poor management often stems from fear, and it can be exacerbated by inadequate support, communication, recognition, and a lack of respect, all of which can worsen burnout.

A management study by Humu found that 95% of employees believe that bad managers worsen workplace issues. Furthermore, following the pandemic, managers appear to be declining in their ability to listen, provide feedback, and communicate transparently—critical elements for employees to perform their roles effectively and with clear guideposts.²⁷

The associated organizational costs of poor leadership and management are substantial. Gallup's research on workplace burnout reveals that employees facing burnout are 2.6 times more likely to seek a different job actively, with burned-out employees being 63% more likely to take sick days.²⁸

Simply put, bad managers mess with everyone's experience.

Try This:

- **Train Your Managers Well:** Sustainable change emerges through the gradual (read: long-term) integration and reinforcement of behavioral shifts. When developing management training programs,

the objective should be to cultivate competent, compassionate, and courageous leaders, with training aiming for the following outcomes. Managers who:

- Provide support by listening and identifying tensions and stressors, including their own, engaging in open and courageous conversations, and providing resources to help employees effectively manage their workloads
 - Engage in direct and empathetic conversations, enabling them to understand employees' needs and address concerns
 - Employ conflict resolution techniques to swiftly address issues early on, preventing them from escalating
 - Utilize stress management techniques to navigate stress and guide employees, particularly during high workload periods or crises
 - Ensure equitable and sustainable workload distribution among their teams
 - Challenge their own assumptions and fears while also fostering an environment where their team members feel safe to do the same
- **Meet Them Where They're At:** How often do your direct reports need to talk to you? Are more frequent, informal one-on-one meetings beneficial for certain members of your team? As a manager, understanding what your team members require based on what they're navigating at work and in their personal lives allows you to enhance your decision-making skills and enables you to offer more effective and tailored coaching support.

Each person has unique preferences, strengths, and needs, and may stumble at varying points throughout their career. Ask how you can best support them to achieve their best performance and well-being. For example, if someone prefers biweekly meetings but is currently dealing with a demanding project, onboarding several new team members, and managing elderly care, you might suggest meeting more frequently for quick checkups until things stabilize a bit.

Workplace Culture

Problem: Workplace culture is frequently the unspoken but pervasive force in the room. We may avoid discussing it openly because it can be uncomfortable, but its influence permeates every interaction and decision. Negative workplace cultures have a strong connection to burnout and

various psychological health issues. Whether you are actively contributing to this culture, experiencing its harmful effects, or both, its impact is unmistakable. It's not surprising that work environments characterized by interpersonal conflicts, bullying, discrimination, or harassment provide fertile ground for burnout.

Try This:

- **Champion a Drama-Free Culture:** These days, it may not always seem so, but managers hold the reins when it comes to workplace dynamics. Communicate thoughtfully and fully own your team's results without pointing fingers at others or external factors—it all rests on your shoulders. Consistently apply rules with fairness. When making a decision, consider the impact it will have on every individual and own your decision. Instead of assigning blame, dive into self-reflection and ask, “What might I be overlooking as a cause for this disruption?” or “How can I help connect the dots better across and between teams?”
- **Stop Being Complacent:** It's hard because we're often afraid of calling out what's messing with our cultures. But someone has to do it and that someone should be the person guiding the team. Steer clear of passive-aggressive behaviors like making excuses, showing favoritism, orchestrating secretive campaigns, or playing the blame game. Instead, cultivate trust and break down silos through open dialogue, meaningful connections, and relationships that provide you with the insights necessary to make fair and well-informed decisions.

Insufficient Rest and Recovery

Problem: Adequate rest and recovery are often overlooked, leading to an increased risk of burnout. In her book *Rest Is Resistance*, Tricia Hersey highlights the pervasive issue of “grind culture,” prioritizing constant work and productivity at the expense of rest. This work culture often leads us to neglect reparative practices like unplugging from social media, slowing down or engaging in activities that help us reconnect with our minds and bodies.²⁹ Ignoring our body's and mind's signals makes us susceptible to chronic stress and burnout and can harm our overall health. A 2022 report from the World Health Organization underscores the importance of health as an investment within the broader societal context. It emphasizes the pivotal role of rest in promoting overall health and well-being.

Try This:

- **Lead by Example:** Setting the tone starts at the top, and you are the one you've been waiting for. Look no further. Encourage, guide, and inspire yourself and the managers on your teams to uphold boundaries, safeguard their physical and mental well-being, and champion the importance of rest.
- **Plan for the Unforeseen:** Support employees in allocating time for unexpected moments by encouraging them to include buffer time in their schedules. Respect these designated periods and avoid encroaching on them like an inconsiderate chat message. Furthermore, promote a flexible approach to task management that enables employees to adjust to unexpected challenges as they arise.

Women and People of Color: What's Seen and Unseen

Women and people of color often face compounded workplace stressors due to additional expectations—some self-imposed and others imposed by societal pressures. These expectations include providing emotional support for the organizational culture and taking on various unseen responsibilities that consume their time and resources. Unfortunately, these contributions frequently go unpaid, unrecognized, and unrewarded.

To truly break free from the burden of unfair labor practices and the ease with which our society and workplaces benefit from this hidden work, we must begin by exposing it to the light.

In her *Time Inc.* article “How to Put an End to the Inequities of Unseen Work,” S. Mitra Kalick highlights the disproportionate impact of invisible labor on women and individuals from marginalized communities.³⁰ She draws attention to the insights of Leah Goodridge, the managing attorney for housing policy at Mobilization for Justice. Goodridge points out that women often invest significant time and effort in nurturing and sustaining relationships with colleagues, clients, and stakeholders—a practice that is essential for business success, teamwork, and productivity.

Furthermore, Goodridge sheds light on the tendency for people of color to assume a “supporting character role,” as she aptly terms it. In this role, individuals of color find themselves frequently called upon by their white colleagues to provide emotional support and help identify, analyze, and offer insights into systemic issues within their respective institutions. This dynamic places an additional, often unacknowledged, burden on

people of color, further illustrating the pervasive impact of invisible labor in our society.

Let me make it very clear: Black people, women, marginalized people, really no one, owes you their emotional labor. And it's burning them from the inside out.

When you add the factors that disproportionately prevent women, people of color, and other marginalized communities from advancing in the workplace, including microaggressions, double standards, the experience of being “an only,” and bias, among others, it becomes evident that their exhaustion levels have risen to unmanageable levels.

Workday blunders may not be necessarily fueled by racist, sexist, or oppressive intentions. Nevertheless, when such experiences have been a part of your personal history, it can be difficult to interpret them in any other manner. This can contribute to additional dimensions of burnout.

It can feel overwhelming, unmanageable, and simply impossible, but in the modern workplace, every manager's responsibility includes identifying the signs of burnout. Consider the impact you can make by being attentive to what might be negatively affecting your team members and building new management muscles through strategies aimed at enhancing their well-being. Ready to learn more?

Let the Sparks Fly: How We Grow

Now that we've explored the signs and impact of burnout, what it is, and its nuanced expressions of depletion, I invite you to reflect on the following questions as you embark on the journey to reclaim your inner spark as a manager:

- Who would I be if I was not burnt crispy?
- What is preventing me from becoming the best version of myself as a healthy leader?

Remember:

- Burnout is not a scoreboard of your shortcomings.
- When your employee tells you they're burned out, listen and uncover sources of exhaustion or discontent.

- What works: manageable workloads, a sense of purpose, fairness, trust, connection, and psychological safety.
- What you can do: Highlight the “why,” offer meaningful growth opportunities, guide without overwhelming, spread leadership, design flexible work arrangements, set boundaries, train managers well, meet employees where they’re at, champion a drama-free culture, banish complacency with poor behaviors, and lead by example.

Scripts for Managers:

These scripts are tools for managing workplace stress and burnout for yourself and your team. They encourage open dialogue, self-care, and a focus on growth, critical elements in maintaining a healthy work environment.

When you’re feeling the heat rise and depletion begin, consider reciting these mantras:

- I choose calm.
- I am safe.
- I trust in my ability to lead my team.
- It’s OK to pause, rest, and replenish.

When an employee approaches you about their burnout or you sense that their reactions may be signs of burnout, consider asking:

- What comes up for you emotionally or physically when you come to work or join a meeting?
- What do you think is driving your feelings about your work environment?
- How, if at all, have your feelings toward colleagues and work changed in the past 6–12 months?
- How can I help?