

## *C. How Do We Deal with Burnout?*

Excerpt from:

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The applied nature of burnout research has prompted calls for effective intervention throughout the research literature. This perspective has encouraged considerable effort, but relatively little systematic research. Various intervention strategies have been proposed—some try to treat burnout after it has occurred, whereas others focus on how to prevent burnout.

Interestingly, most discussions of burnout interventions focus primarily on individual-centered solutions, such as removing the worker from the job, or individual strategies for the worker, in which one either strengthens one's internal resources or changes one's work behaviors. This is particularly paradoxical given that research has found that situational and organizational factors play a bigger role in burnout than individual ones. Individual-oriented approaches (e.g. developing effective coping skills or learning deep relaxation) may help individuals to alleviate exhaustion, but they do not really deal with the other two components of burnout. Also, individual strategies are relatively ineffective in the workplace, where a person has much less control over stressors than in other domains of his or her life. There are both philosophical and pragmatic reasons underlying the predominant focus on the individual, including notions of individual causality and responsibility, and the assumption that it is easier and cheaper to change people than organizations (Maslach & Goldberg 1998).

### **Changing the Individual**

The primary focus of studies of burnout reduction has been educational interventions to enhance the

capacity of individuals to cope with the workplace.... At the root of this approach are three questions: Can people learn coping skills? Can they apply this learning at work? Do new ways of coping affect burnout?

With respect to the first question, both the stress literature and a burgeoning self-help literature in the popular press have demonstrated that people can indeed learn new ways of coping. The similar conclusion to be drawn from the burnout research is that educational sessions can enhance the capacity of human service professionals to cope with the demands of their jobs. However, the second question does not receive such a positive answer. Applying new knowledge at work can be a challenge because people are operating under various constraints. Their roles at work require that they behave in specified ways, and organizational procedures stipulate the time and place in which much work occurs. Coworkers are designated according to their job functions, not their personal compatibility. Thus, if there is going to be significant change in the way work is done, it will require a degree of autonomy and an understanding of the organizational consequences of such change. Assuming that it is indeed possible for people to apply new coping skills at work, does this lead to reductions in burnout? The research findings are mixed. A wide variety of intervention strategies have been tried, including stress inoculation training, relaxation, time management, assertiveness training, rational emotive therapy, training in interpersonal and social skills, teambuilding, management of professional demands, and meditation. In some cases, a reduction in exhaustion has been reported, but in other cases it has not. Rarely do any programs

report a change in cynicism or inefficacy. Limitations in study design, especially difficulties in access to appropriate control groups and a lack of longitudinal assessment, have constrained the interpretation of the existing research.

### **Changing the Organization**

In line with the findings from the research literature, a focus on the job environment, as well as the person in it, is essential for interventions to deal with burnout. This suggests that the most effective mode of intervention is to combine changes in managerial practice with the educational interventions described above. Managerial interventions are necessary to change any of the six areas of worklife but are insufficient unless educational interventions convey the requisite individual skills and attitudes. Neither changing the setting nor changing the individuals is enough; effective change occurs when both develop in an integrated fashion.

The recognition of six areas of worklife expands the range of options for organizational intervention. For example, rather than concentrating on the area of work overload for an intervention (such as teaching people how to cope with overload, how to cut back on work, or how to relax), a focus on some of the other mismatches may be more effective. People may be able to tolerate greater workload if they value the work and feel they are doing something important, or if they feel wellrewarded for their efforts, and so an intervention could target these areas of value and reward.

Initial work in this area is encouraging but incomplete. One promising approach focused on the area of fairness and equity. Employees participated in weekly group sessions designed to identify ways of reducing the perceived inequities in their job situation. In comparison with control groups, participants reported a significant decrease in emotional exhaustion at six months and one year after the intervention. These changes were accompanied by increases in perceived equity. Again, however, the other two aspects of burnout did not change relative to baseline levels (van

Dierendonck et al 1998).

One advantage of a combined managerial and educational approach to intervention is that it tends to emphasize building engagement with work. The focus on engagement permits a closer alliance with the organizational mission, especially those aspects that pertain to the quality of worklife in the organization. A worksetting that is designed to support the positive development of energy, vigor, involvement, dedication, absorption, and effectiveness among its employees should be successful in promoting their well-being and productivity.- Moreover, the statement of a positive goal for intervention-building engagement (rather than reducing burnout)--enhances the accountability of the intervention. Assessing the presence of something is more definite than assessing the absence of its opposite.

Although the potential value of organizational interventions is great, they are not easy to implement. They are often complex in the level of collaboration that is necessary and they require a considerable investment of time, effort, and money. A new approach to such interventions has been designed on the basis of past research and consultation on burnout, and may provide better guidance to organizations for dealing with these issues (Leiter & Maslach 2000).

Leiter M.P., & Maslach C. (2000). *Preventing Burnout and Building Engagement: A Complete Program for Organizational Renewal*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

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