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Job Burnout As a Library Management Issue

By Casey Schacher

Professional burnout has long been a problem for organizations, yet it wasn't until recent decades that the condition, often associated with extreme incidents, referred to as "going postal," has been given serious recognition. Nevertheless, more and more people are beginning to realize the impact of chronic workplace stress on both employees and their workplaces. Just as workers experience severe mental, emotional, and physical consequences of job burnout, management has witnessed its effects on organizational morale, productivity, prosperity and stability. Libraries are no exception to this. In fact, the nature of librarianship as a helping profession caught up in rapid change and fiscal instability may promote chronic career anxiety. Because of this, the topic of burnout must move beyond being an individual's problem to being viewed as a library management issue that deserves organization-wide attention and strategic actions geared toward reducing negative stress in the workplace.

Burnout is related to but different from common stress. Typically, stress is manageable and can even be beneficial if dealt with effectively. Burnout, on the other hand, occurs when chronic, persistent stress becomes unmanageable and results in emotional, physical and mental exhaustion.¹ People with burnout feel that inner resources are inadequate for managing the tasks and situations presented to them.² The symptoms range from subtle to serious, and can render a good employee ineffective. Burnout is highly correlated with "increased absenteeism, reduced productivity, reduced mental health, and reduced physical health."³ Those who are afflicted often experience fatigue, anxiety, apathy, digestive problems, and even psychosomatic illnesses and heart attacks. While these are only a few of the symptoms, employees often feel that burnout is caused by adverse work conditions, including being:

- Overworked,
- Underappreciated,
- Confused about expectations and priorities,
- Concerned about job security,
- Overcommitted with responsibilities,
- Resentful about duties that are not commensurate with pay.⁴

Although anyone can suffer from burnout, certain personality traits and other factors can be indicators of at risk individuals. Young, energetic, idealistic, committed and perfectionist employees are most at risk for burnout, and if the condition is left unchecked many of these workers may decide to change jobs or even careers.⁵ Burnout is also associated with job responsibility. For example, full time librarians are more susceptible to chronic stress than part time employees.⁶ Similarly, people with higher levels of education and/or greater degrees of responsibility are more likely to burn out. Since burnout drastically reduces job performance, the people who have the most potential and who are highly qualified to benefit an organization are the very people who can, given enough time and adverse conditions, become the least stable employees.

Librarianship, as a service profession dealing with the complexities of informational and technological advancement, dwindling budgets and downsizing, is at risk for inducing job burnout. Some stressful work conditions, such as low pay, increased workloads, bureaucratic inertia and increased job competition, are shared by all helping professions. Others, however, are unique to the library. Censorship, librarianship stereotypes, clerical workloads for professional positions and a lack of input in collection development and other library-related policies are just a few of the complaints posed by librarians.⁷ Librarians, generally highly educated with heavy workloads and intense responsibilities, are particularly at risk for persistent, unmanageable workplace stress.

Stressful conditions that adversely effect organizations are plentiful in libraries, and, as a result, burnout has become an increasingly important management topic. Job stress that causes sick time, long-term disability, excessive employee turnover, reduced productivity and direct medical, legal, and insurance costs is estimated to cost the U.S. economy \$300 billion annually.⁸ Employees in danger of burning out often feel unable or unequipped to finish even simple tasks

and may quickly become overwhelmed as unfinished work piles up, thus creating a burden on the organization and those that depend on that work to be completed. Yet not all stress is bad; some stress, such as a challenging yet fulfilling workload, is needed to prevent boredom and to motivate employees.⁹ The issue for managers, then, is to identify and negate unhealthy anxiety while encouraging positive stress so that they may gain optimum performance from workers without pushing them over the edge.

An important task for artful managers concerned with burnout is to identify stressful conditions as well as which employees are most likely to be effected by them. Managers should be on the lookout for burnout symptoms or at risk employees and provide support to those that need it. When burnout is spotted, it may be that the person could use help prioritizing and breaking up larger projects into more manageable steps. Caution should be used, however, when attempting to implement institution-wide support programs since what is stressful to one employee or department may not be an issue for another. Those not experiencing burnout may look upon task management help as a removal of autonomy, which is a cause of tension in and of itself.¹⁰ Managing burnout requires finely tuned social skills that facilitate the identification of troubled employees as well as the ability to distinguish when and where aid is needed.

Despite the need to distinguish between negative and positive stress and those who do or do not need assistance, several techniques exist that can let managers ease the burden of stress for all employees without endangering the organization's harmony. One of the best opportunities for management to help battle potential burnout is to set up a foundation of success from the onset of a person's employment. Proper training of new professionals coupled with a gradual, individualized introduction to pertinent information prevents unrealistic expectations of both the employee and the employer and builds confidence in the worker's ability to perform effectively in the new environment. One suggestion is to alternate actual tasks with orientation sessions, allowing new staff members to "build up to a full work load and a full knowledge of the system."¹¹ Well-trained employees will be more likely to feel equipped, both mentally and emotionally, to effectively handle assignments and responsibilities and, empowered by the resulting self-assurance, will have a better chance of fending off job burnout.

Like new employees, existing workers can also benefit from management strategies designed to minimize the negative effects of workplace stress. Perhaps one of the most effective, easiest and inexpensive methods to promote healthy employees is to encourage and administer direct feedback that includes peer recognition. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, such as through regular meetings centered on discussing employee goals and projects as well as through incentive and appreciation programs. In order to be successful, however, feedback should be positive, informative, timely and should ideally come from someone who understands the nature of the accomplishment.¹² Management may need to train themselves and others on how to make positive comments even if the related observations are negative. Also, generalized praise as well as recognition that comes days or weeks tardy or from an unqualified source may not have the desired impact.

Other crucial yet simple tactics to reducing burnout include manipulating the physical environment and encouraging continued professional development. Because management has the greatest ability to change the physical workspace, they can more easily create environments conducive to productivity. When possible, managers should reduce distracting noises, encourage personalization and organization of workspaces and provide comfortable temperatures and pleasant lighting in work areas and lounges.¹³ Another technique is to promote continued professional growth that increases self-esteem and professional competence. Learning new things is "one of the best ways for those who are not experiencing burnout to prevent its occurrence."¹⁴ Additional formal education and professional conferences and training meetings are excellent sources for growth and should be advocated for by management through verbal approval and financial and mental support. To help reduce the chances that learning itself (which is a positive stress) becomes a source of significant anxiety, management may wish to not require an employee to report on what was learned or to enroll several employees at once in the same educational activity to distribute the responsibility.

Chronic workplace stress that leads to burnout is a major issue for modern organizations, including libraries. Its effects can be devastating not only to the individual suffering but also to the institution as a whole. Management is faced with the tricky tasks of recognizing stressful conditions, identifying at-risk employees, finding the balance between good and bad stress and helping to reduce stressors while avoiding aggravating conditions even further. Through simple, yet effective techniques, however, workplace burnout can be prevented and even reversed.

References

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