

Avoiding Burnout

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Ask the Expert

Q. We in our HR Department are overloaded. There are not enough hours in the day to meet the demands, staff complain about being overwhelmed. How can we avoid burn-out?

A. Indeed, HR Professionals need to be aware of the risks of burn-out. We are in a profession that places us in the middle of 'people issues' which can have a personal impact on how we feel about our work. We are challenged to align and balance human concerns with business interests. Furthermore, the more 'strategic' we become, the more challenging our work can be. Above all, HR Professionals seek a high level of fulfillment in our work; we want to leave an impact with whatever we do!

To recognize and manage the risk of burn-out means that we need to see ourselves somewhere on the continuum of **Stress – Distress – Burn-out**. **Stress** is normal; we all have and need stress to function, let's not complain about stress but embrace it so that we can engage in our day-to-day work. Part of embracing stress is to engage in a healthy lifestyle which includes appropriate diet, exercise, relaxation and social support. Integrating and balancing our work and personal life is good stress management. **Distress** emerges when we are feeling overwhelmed by the demands of work. We can be pre-occupied with work concerns and events and, most importantly, our normal 'stress management' practices do not provide us with a sense of well-being. Along with feeling overwhelmed we can also experience changes in our health and behaviour. If we experience 'distress' for a prolonged period of time, we run the risk of becoming 'burnt out'. **Burn-out** is like a fatigue which is brought about because our devotion to a cause, way of life or a relationship failed to bring about the expected result. Burn-out has to do with a loss of meaning, purpose or fulfillment. We can become disillusioned or frustrated in our responses to normal events.

As HR Professionals we need to be cognizant of a number of root causes of burn-out. Low levels of trust, respect or cohesion within our organization; a lack of support for the human side of work and limited opportunity for advancement are some organizational causes. We have 'High Demand – Low Control' and 'High Effort – Low Reward' scenarios which can be characteristic of our work. We also need to recognize that there are personal factors such as unresolved grief, life changes and even being under or over employed that can contribute to burn-out.

So what do we do to avoid burn-out?

The most important preventative thing that we can do is to continually clarify our focus, mission or purpose in life. Know who we are, what our organization is about and make

sure that the two are aligned. The second most important thing is to be accountable for our own behaviour, choices and responses to events and people. We need to be ready to say 'Good morning God' rather than 'Good God it's morning' and to keep a positive and realistic attitude about the realities of our present situation.. The third is to be conscious of what is going on around and within us. Notice when we become more negative, experience health changes, changes in our sleeping or eating patterns. Be careful about consistently bringing work issues home. Be aware of the pattern of self-medicating with food, drugs, gambling, tobacco or cyber-sex – all of these are distractions which can take over your life and become more important than daily living.

Finally, establish a solid foundation to support your day-to-day activity – exercise appropriately, establish boundaries with your time, nurture positive relationships, get involved in activities that can tap into your creativity or social skills. Decide what you are accountable for and do not take on the accountabilities of others! Most importantly, know who you are, your goals, focus and limitations and live everyday to the fullest.

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