

Breaking the Burnout Cycle: Practical Tips for Project Managers

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During this month of May, as we celebrate Mental Health Awareness, I would like to dedicate this article specifically to this purpose.

Unfortunately, despite the drastic increase in campaigns on mental health awareness in recent years, employee burnout remains one of the dominant factors in many organisations.

But, let's first align ourselves with the meaning of burnout. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines burnout as:

“a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized 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; and*
- *reduced professional efficacy.”*

So how can Project Managers help in avoiding employee burnout?

Causes of Burnout

Research conducted by Dr. John Chan, Sally Clarke, Andrew Freedman, and Amanda Cebrian, published in their report titled "[The State of Workplace Burnout 2023](#)", identifies several factors that contribute to burnout. Among them, **chronic workplace stress**, emerges as a primary culprit stemming from factors such as demanding workload, long working hours, and lack of control over work. Additionally, insufficient **organisational support**, encompassing issues like a lack of recognition, ineffective communication, and inadequate resources, plays a significant role. Finally, the recent shifts in **how we work**, especially the blurring of work-life boundaries, are also one of the key contributing factors of burnout.

Impact of Burnout on Project Success

Numerous studies highlight the significant impact of burnout, affecting both employees and wider organisations.

Burnout on employees often leads to decreased productivity, reduced quality of work, increased absenteeism, and higher turnover rates. Furthermore, it negatively affects the employee's physical and mental health, therefore elevating the risk of depression, anxiety, and cardiovascular disease.

Given these detrimental effects on employees, it is unsurprising that burnout also leaves its mark on organisations. With a decrease in productivity and reduced quality of work, it is inevitably that organisations face a decline in revenues. Furthermore, organisations end up investing more in reactive healthcare measures and innovative initiatives to attract new employees or enhance their employee retention rate.

All these factors highlight the importance for project managers to address and proactively prevent employee burnout as a crucial element in their daily responsibilities.

Preventive Measures for Burnout

Given the continuous changes in the environment, organisations constantly face pressures to swiftly develop innovative products and service offerings to remain competitive and survive. Consequently, urgent project demands are often imposed by senior management, intensifying workloads and pressure across all facets of the organisation.

To safeguard against burnout, project managers can implement several measures, including:

- **Promoting workload management** - work with senior management to identify critical tasks, distinguishing between nice-to-have and absolutely must-haves features. Break long term commitments into smaller, ideally independent tasks. Implement a prioritisation mechanism that is adaptable to changes in the external environment, one which provides adequate weight to factors aligned with the organisation's strategic objectives and industry demands.
- **Working with Data** – use factual data to assess the ideal capacity that employees can manage, ensuring optimal productivity and quality while maintaining a healthy work-life balance.
- **Diligently assigning tasks** – use the output of the prioritisation framework and data related to the ideal individual work capacity when assigning tasks. This ensures a realistic workload, prioritising quality and employees' mental health over quantity. Additionally, this approach facilitates the establishment of clear goals and expectations.
- **Working as a team** – shift the focus from an individual mindset to one of a collaborative teamwork. The ultimate objective is to foster cohesive teamwork dedicated to collectively achieving the project goals, while ingraining in the team's DNA the practices of knowledge-sharing and lessons learnt.
- **Equipping individuals with necessary skills and tools** – invest in personal development by proactively identifying and aligning any skill gaps with the organisational strategic objectives and project requirements. Furthermore, ensure that the team is well-equipped with the right tools that support them in their day-to-day work.
- **Celebrating success** – organisations often get caught in a cycle of continuous work without stopping to acknowledge and celebrate successes. Celebrating achievements is a means of recognition and appreciation, which boosts the overall teams' morale and motivation.
- **Practicing genuine work-life balance** – encourage team members to take regular breaks to recharge. Make sure that they consume their vacation days and time off to prevent burnout from prolonged work without breaks. Additionally, foster flexibility and collaborate with senior management to implement wellness initiatives in the workplace.

Supporting the aforementioned measures is the element of transparency and communication. Implementing certain measures may prove challenging without the support, and in some cases, active endorsement from senior management. Project managers must establish trust with senior management, and one way to achieve this is through continuous communication and complete

transparency. This entails covering all aspects of delivery, including the team's optimal capacity, timelines, and overall project progress.

Furthermore, it's essential for project managers to feel comfortable discussing mental health and be open to seeking professional support when necessary. Regularly assessing coping mechanisms for both themselves and their teams is crucial. Remember, dedication to fostering psychological safety is paramount to remove any stigma associated with discussing mental health in the workplace.

Addressing burnout is not a peripheral task, but an integral component of the project manager's role. While it is natural for project managers to feel overwhelmed with the demands and pressures of their roles, neglecting the signs of burnout can lead to severe consequences for both individuals and the overall project.

Let's not confine our awareness of mental health to just the month of May. Instead, let's collaboratively strive to create an environment that safeguards our employees from burnout throughout the entire year!

About Me



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With over 15 years of expertise, I am a highly motivated and results-driven transformation strategy expert, with a track record of defining, executing, and overseeing large-scale strategic and transformational programs, bringing changes in mindsets, innovative practices, and tools to tackle complex challenges.

Throughout my career, I've spearheaded the development and management of Strategy, Transformation, Professional Services, Project Management, and Digital offices, collaborating with Boards, C-Level Executives, and international clients. This journey involves coaching and training in Project Management and Agile methodologies for individuals with diverse skill sets.

Currently, I serve as the Vice-Chairman of the PMI Malta Steering Committee, actively contributing to establishing the first PMI Chapter in Malta.

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