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STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Reversing Burnout **How to rekindle your passion for your work**

By Christina Maslach & Michael P. Leiter

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Winter 2005

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REVERSING

How to rekindle your passion for your work

BURNOUT

MARK¹ IS EXHAUSTED. AS A COMMITTED ENVIRONMENTAL activist, he logs hundreds of pro bono hours every year organizing rallies, circulating petitions, raising funds, lobbying legislators, and campaigning for like-minded politicians. And that's not even his day job; Mark is also pursuing a full-time career to pay the bills.

"I'm feeling totally overwhelmed by the immensity of the problems we face," he says, "but I keep pushing myself. It's like an anorexic getting thin. When you're an activist, you're never working hard enough."

Lately, though, Mark's passion has been increasingly tainted with bitterness. "I sometimes look at the stuff I have to do and I get angry," he says. "Like, why doesn't somebody else do some of it? Why is it just *me*?" Mark is also disturbed to find himself muttering, "Oh, a pox on them" when he thinks about the communities he is trying to help. "They don't want to save them-

selves," he continues, "so why should I go out of my way?"

Susan is also bitter. After five years as an emergency department physician at St. Joseph Hospital, she still feels left out of the tight-knit team of ER staff. "I need to be included in discussions about patients, diagnoses, and interventions," she says, "and I need a meaningful voice in decisions on medical practice in this ER." Yet neither is happening.

The other doctors – all men – have extended their circle to include the ER nurses and assistants. But they don't seem to know what to do with Susan. Instead of treating her as their equal, they make important decisions without consulting her, disrespecting her status and abilities.

In turn, Susan doesn't know what to do with her male colleagues. "I can't get into the flirty banter that goes on between the male doctors and nurses," says Susan. "That isn't the way I operate, and it doesn't go with my responsibilities as a doctor."

“It’s like an anorexic getting thin. When you’re an activist, you’re never working hard enough.”

And so recently, Susan finds that the usual aches and pains of a long day’s work are now paired with a deeper, more troubling feeling: She just doesn’t care about what she is doing. This dullness of heart scares Susan. If she can’t count on her sensitivity to patients, she can’t be confident of her work.

Both Mark and Susan are suffering from burnout. Far more than feeling blue or having a bad day, burnout is a chronic problem. Burned-out people often feel exhausted and overwhelmed like Mark, self-doubting and anxious like Susan, and bitter and cynical like both of them.

Burnout reflects an uneasy relationship between people and their work. Like relationship problems between two people, those between people and their work usually indicate a bad fit between the two, rather than *just* individual weaknesses, or *just* evil workplaces. And so reversing burnout requires focusing on both individuals and their organizations to bring them back into sync with each other.²

Beating burnout is not just a matter of reducing the number of negatives. Indeed, sometimes there is not a lot you can do about the negative aspects of work. Instead, it is often more useful to think about increasing the number of positives, and of building the opposite of burnout, engagement. When burnout is counteracted with engagement, exhaustion is replaced with enthusiasm, bitterness with compassion, and anxiety with efficacy.

The Six Areas of Burnout

How do individuals and organizations move from burnout to engagement? How do they make sense of what’s going wrong, and figure out how to make things right? Our surveys and interviews of more than 10,000 people across a wide range of organizations in several different countries have revealed that most person-job mismatches fall into six categories: workload (too much work, not enough resources); control (micromanage-

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ment, lack of influence, accountability without power); reward (not enough pay, acknowledgment, or satisfaction); community (isolation, conflict, disrespect); fairness (discrimination, favoritism); and values (ethical conflicts, meaningless tasks).³

We originally developed this six-category framework as a way of organizing the vast research literature on burnout. Our subsequent work then showed that both individuals and organizations could use the framework to diagnose which categories are especially troublesome for them, and then to design interventions that target these problem areas.⁴ The six-area framework has now been incorporated into assessment programs for organizations⁵ and for individuals.⁶ (See sidebar on p. 48 for more about the individual assessment.)

To fix burnout, individuals and organizations must first identify the areas in which their mismatches lie, and then tailor solutions to improve the fit within each area. In Mark’s case, his core problem is work overload. Workers in the nonprofit sector are distinctly vulnerable to work overload for two reasons. First, nonprofit organizations may often have fewer resources than organizations in other sectors, leaving workers with too little time and too few tools with which to handle their workload. Second, nonprofit employees have high expectations and are attempting to solve truly monumental problems. Their idealism can lead them to overextend themselves and take on too much.

Mark is also experiencing an imbalance in the area of values. Although workers in the nonprofit sector may not face the same ethical dilemmas that many workers in for-profit companies do, they often feel value conflicts of a different sort: between the loftiness of their ideals and the realities of their day-to-day work. This is what is going on with Mark, who often feels so bogged

Burnout in a Crisis

How Katrina relief workers are faring

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Jan Wawrzyniak worked 15 hours a day for seven days straight, answering calls from people who were stranded or searching for relatives. Calls from New Orleans to 2-1-1, the nationwide human services referral phone line, were being forwarded to her United Way office in Monroe, La. She was suddenly catapulted from administrator to crisis operator, fielding hundreds of urgent requests for shelter, supplies, food, and funds. "I was sleeping three hours a night and eventually had a melt-down. I just couldn't stop crying," Wawrzyniak says.

She was suffering from the kind of burnout that many people working in intense and prolonged disaster situations face. For her and thousands of other relief workers in the Katrina effort, workload and control issues (see main article) packed the hardest punch. Too many problems to handle in too short a time – with inadequate resources and hand-tying bureaucracies – made things rough for professionals and volunteers alike.

"Before we expanded to a 50-person station, it was chaos," says Wawrzyniak of the Monroe outpost, which has fielded about 56,000 Katrina calls. "People telephoned in dire straits, and you'd feel frantic trying to get them what they needed – only to realize it wasn't working. One man said he was running out of diapers for his baby. He was considering breaking into the local Wal-Mart and leaving an IOU. It was heartbreaking."

Jack Slattery, a former Peace Corps volunteer, helped the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) set up a disaster recovery center in

Bogalusa, La., and worked with hurricane victims filing for financial assistance. "FEMA told us it would be emotionally draining, and it was," says Slattery. "So many needs and so few resources." After a month of working 12-hour days, he was ready to go home.

"One of the things that made the job challenging was FEMA itself," Slattery says. "Orders came from above, military style, and there was an unwillingness to move the most urgent requests up the system." Slattery also says that FEMA's rules governing which Katrina victims received \$2,000 aid grants seemed capricious, and frequently neglected the poorest and neediest. "It was frustrating to work in such an environment," he says.

Slattery personally coped by taking morning walks, waking up every day at 6 a.m. "It helped me release stress," he says. He also vented his emotions to

his wife and other workers.

Wawrzyniak's 2-1-1 operation instituted rotating schedules so that everyone could take at least one day a week off. The center also made crisis counselors available to workers on every shift.

Such techniques are recommended by the American Psychological Association, which regularly provides mental health workers to the American Red Cross for disaster relief efforts. "The Red Cross approach used to be: Work until the job gets done," says Richard Heaps, a psychologist who helped organize counseling services for Katrina victims in September. "Giving workers periods of rest to recover their energies makes them better able to serve others," he says.

Or, as flight attendants say, put the mask on your own face before attempting to assist others.

—Marguerite Rigoglioso



Where to start? Hurricane relief workers find coping with disaster overwhelming without care for themselves.



An Organizational Approach to Healing Burnout

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, THE BUSINESS AND administrative services division of a large nonprofit institution was facing serious troubles. Its talented workforce had become demoralized and burned-out, and no wonder. The organization's management corps was minimally trained. Its far-flung departments had trouble communicating with each other. Its 17 departments had become 17 silos, rarely collaborating. There were almost as many organizational strategies as there were staff members. And to top it all off, the organization lacked important resources.

The division's management decided to use our organizational checkup survey to measure burnout across the six areas. All employees were given the opportunity to fill out this probing questionnaire, which was locally retitled the "Let's Hear It! Survey." Ninety percent of the 1,100 staff replied with gusto, adding reams of free-form comments.

Administering the survey, we observed many telling moments. In a particularly troubled wing of the organization, six supervisors refused to take the survey as long as their common manager was in the room. About 70 staff took the survey in one of five languages other than English. (Oral translation was provided in Spanish, Cantonese, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Tagalog.) These staff members, for whom English was a second (or third) language, showed remarkable enthusiasm for the survey – the first time ever that they had been invited to communicate in the workplace in their native language.

The survey results showed that the biggest problem areas were fairness and values. For instance, the staff felt that favoritism guided promotions, and that a special bonus program was not actually based on merit. Employees from every frontline unit were formed into committees, charged with examining the survey results for their unit and with developing initiatives for change. One committee, for example, worked to develop a distinguished service award that would be judged as a fair way to reward people who had made exceptional contributions to the organization's goals. A year later, a second survey showed that these changes had led to successful improvements in all six areas, but especially the targeted ones of fairness and values.

—Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter

down in the details of organizing volunteers and coordinating actions that he loses sight of the larger goal of environmental preservation. His work no longer feels meaningful to him.

Mark also feels a lot of dissatisfaction in the area of rewards. No one goes into the nonprofit sector to get rich, but Mark expected to enjoy his activist activities more. He also expected more appreciation and praise from his colleagues and from the communities he serves.

In contrast, Susan's core problem is in the area of community.⁷ In her work setting, she is excluded from her colleagues' circle of support, and she spends a lot of time feeling isolated and lonely. Being left out of the loop introduces a second mismatch for Susan, this time in the area of control. By the time an issue appears on a meeting's formal agenda, the matter has already been settled in the informal conversations in which Susan could not participate. As a result, Susan does not feel that she has an adequate say in how she does her work.

As time wears on, Susan has begun to suspect that her lack of community and control at work are due to a third area of mismatch: fairness. She wonders whether the male doctors in the ER are discriminating against her because she is a woman. Because of this hint of injustice, Susan feels not only anxious and uncertain about how best to do her job, but also angry and hostile toward her colleagues.

Two Paths to Engagement

There are two paths to banishing burnout: the individual path, and the organizational path. Both Mark and Susan took individual approaches; they first identified the mismatches leading to their burnout, and then enlisted their colleagues and organizations in addressing those mismatches.⁸

An organizational approach, in contrast, starts with management first identifying mismatches that are commonly shared, and then connecting with individuals to narrow these person-organization gaps.⁹ The sidebar (left) describes how this organizational approach was used in a large organization. This strategy of working collaboratively on shared problems can be used in organizations of any size, even those nonprofits that are small and that have limited resources.

No matter the path to engagement, it is important to keep in mind that positive changes don't just happen. Instead, people must take action, and well-informed action, at that. Rather than assumptions and "best guesses" about what the problem is, the six-area diagnostic tool can help pinpoint it more accurately. Solutions that don't address the problem can be worse than no solutions at all.

For example, we recall attending a meeting of teachers for which the school superintendent had hired a motivational speaker to inspire them and help them deal with stress. As the speaker reeled off stories from his own days as an athletic coach, we watched the teachers sitting silently, their venom

rising with each minute. They did not lack motivation. Decent pay, adequate supplies, parents' support, a manageable workload, yes. But not motivation. The superintendent's well-meaning attempt to nip burnout in the bud only nurtured it.

Lightening Mark's Load

Having identified workload as his main relationship problem with his work, Mark is finding ways to relax during strenuous times. He now takes regular breaks in which he gets away from the job, either physically (e.g., by jogging around the neighborhood) or mentally (e.g., by reading a book that has nothing to do with his activist interests). Even more effective for him are temporary changes in work, in which he "downshifts" to some less demanding task (e.g., taking care of routine paperwork, sweeping the floor) before returning to the more challenging jobs.

Another critical discovery for Mark is that he really didn't have to be the center of his activist universe. Instead of being the lone person who does everything, he is learning to delegate tasks, to train others to do what he did, and to get them to share the responsibility. "Now I don't struggle against the feeling of burnout," he says. "I'll say to myself: 'Oh, I'm burned out, I'll just sit here for a while. Let somebody else do it.' And you know what? Somebody else does."

Mark's new perspective on his place in his activist organization reflects the wisdom of an older colleague who told him: "When I was younger, I was convinced that I needed to drive myself every single minute. Now I feel that I can go to the sauna, and I'll still hate imperialism in an hour and a half. And that's helped me to stay an activist."

By addressing his workload problem, Mark has simultaneously improved the fit between him and his activist work on the dimension of value. To relieve stress, he took several long hikes in the wilderness, which renewed his feelings of awe at the beauty of nature – feelings that fueled his commitment to environmental activism in the first place. "I felt in love. It was a passion I hadn't felt in a long time. There was very little burnout. Instead there was a craving."

Building Susan's Community

After zeroing in on community as her primary area of self-work mismatch, Susan first took a few minutes at the start of her next



"It's not just about working with the patients. It's also about taking on colleagues and relationships to make sure you're included and respected."

shift to talk with Tom, one of the most approachable of the doctors. Tom told Susan that he was amazed that she could feel left out, and assured her that no one intended to exclude her. Susan didn't quite buy Tom's assurances, but nevertheless replied that she was pleased to hear this, because she certainly didn't want to go through the complicated, time-consuming, and awkward process of making a formal complaint. She was confident that before too long, the ER doctors' clique would know all about their conversation.

Susan took the second step toward narrowing the gap between her expectations and her work reality at the next meeting of the ER medical staff. She told the staff that she was feeling left out of important decisions, and requested that they

include her in all discussions about clinical matters and hospital issues during her shift. There were a few furtive glances, but overall most people nodded and said, “Of course.”

With Tom and a few other doctors, Susan has smoothly moved into relaxed conversations. She refers to her feelings of burnout only within the context of working on better ways of working together. With the other doctors, it has been more of an uphill battle, but is still an improvement over silence. Since Susan took her complaints to her colleagues, there have been a lot fewer surprises at medical staff meetings, making Susan feel like she has more say in her work environment. She also now

realizes that the doctors’ previous exclusive patterns were more a matter of thoughtlessness than a concerted campaign to exclude her – thereby assuaging her fears of sexism.

Feeling that she is part of a community, respected, and in control is giving Susan a renewed enthusiasm for her work. The end of the shift brings the same familiar pattern of aches and pains from the hours on her feet. But the dullness of feeling is now rare.

“Looking back now, I’m shocked to think of how close I was to losing my connection to the work that I love and that I do very well,” she says. “It’s not just about working with the patients. It’s taking on colleagues and relationships to make

Quick Burnout Assessment

To give an idea of how we assess burnout, here are a few items from our book, “Banishing Burnout: Six Strategies for Improving Your Relationship With Work.” Please note, however, that this is not a complete survey.

For each item, think about how your current work matches up with your personal preferences, work patterns, and aspirations.

	Just Right	Mismatch	Major Mismatch
Workload			
The amount of work to complete in a day			
The frequency of surprising, unexpected events			
Control			
My participation in decisions that affect my work			
The quality of leadership from upper management			
Reward			
Recognition for achievements from my supervisor			
Opportunities for bonuses or raises			
Community			
The frequency of supportive interactions at work			
The closeness of personal friendships at work			
Fairness			
Management’s dedication to giving everyone equal consideration			
Clear and open procedures for allocating rewards and promotions			
Values			
The potential of my work to contribute to the larger community			
My confidence that the organization’s mission is meaningful			

- If everything is a match, you have found an excellent setting for your work
- A few mismatches are not very surprising. People are usually willing and able to tolerate them
- A lot of mismatches, and especially major mismatches in areas that are very important to you, are signs of a potentially intolerable situation

A good understanding of burnout is essential to keeping the flame of compassion and dedication burning brightly.

sure you're included and respected.”

By confronting the situation in an informed and focused way, Susan has been able to repair the relationship between herself and her work. An important principle in Susan's situation is that unfair treatment is difficult to sustain after it has been brought into the open. There were no defensible grounds for excluding Susan from professional discussions at work. But the situation persisted until Susan called her colleagues on their actions.

Shining On

Mark and Susan have had different experiences of burnout, reflecting the unique qualities of their work settings.

Each situation involved a different area of mismatch, and each called for distinct solutions. Note that neither attempted to address all of their mismatches at once. Rather, each first identified and addressed his or her core area of concern.

Both had also begun to feel the personal costs of burnout, which include poorer health and strained private lives. But at least as important, Mark's and Susan's organizations had also begun to suffer. When employees shift to minimum performance, minimum standards of working, and minimum production quality, rather than performing at their best, they make more errors, become less thorough, and have less creativity for solving problems. They are also less committed to the organization and less willing to go the extra mile to make a real difference.

Burnout is not a problem of individuals but of the social environment in which they work. Workplaces shape how people interact with one another and how they carry out their jobs. When the workplace does not recognize the human side of work, and there are major mismatches between the nature of the job and the nature of people, there will be a greater risk of burnout. A good understanding of burnout, its dynamics, and what to do to overcome it is therefore an essential part of staying true to the pursuit of a noble cause, and keeping the flame of compassion and dedication burning brightly. □



1 “Mark” and “Susan” are pseudonyms.

2 For our review of the psychological literature on burnout, see Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W.B., & Leiter, M.P. “Job Burnout,” in *Annual Review of Psychology* 52, eds. S.T. Fiske, D.L. Schacter, & C. Zahn-Waxler (2001): 397-422.

3 Maslach, C. & Leiter, M.P. *The Truth About Burnout* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

4 Leiter, M.P. & Maslach, C. “Areas of Worklife: A Structured Approach to Organizational Predictors of Job Burnout,” in *Research in Occupational Stress and Well-Being* 3, eds. P.L. Perrewe & D.C. Ganster (Oxford: Elsevier, 2004): 91-134.

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

6 Leiter, M.P. & Maslach, C. *Banishing Burnout: Six Strategies for Improving Your Relationship With Work* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

7 See also De Jonge, J. & Kompier, M.A.J. “A Critical Examination of the Demand-Control-Support Model From a Work Psychological Perspective,” *International Journal of Stress Management* 4 (1997): 235-258.

8 Leiter & Maslach, *Banishing Burnout: Six Strategies for Improving Your Relationship With Work*.

9 Leiter & Maslach, *Preventing Burnout and Building Engagement: A Complete Program for Organizational Renewal*.



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