



Leading an Exhausted Workforce

By Robin Abrahams and Boris Groysberg

Have your customers been unusually irritable lately? Are people taking forever to respond to e-mails? Are friends and colleagues making surprising life changes? Have you lost focus during important conversations?

All of these behaviors, different as they may be, are responses to the overwhelming circumstances people are facing as we move into the third year of the pandemic. Nearly everyone has lost someone or something — a job, a relationship, their peace of mind. Any hopes for a clear, definitive end to the pandemic are dashed. We are post-emergency, but still in crisis.

Leaders aren't therapists and shouldn't try to be. But people are coping with collective grief and trauma on a global scale, which means leaders have to learn and exercise new skills. There are steps you can take to foster healthy coping mechanisms and discourage unhealthy ones; help ward off some of the typical mistakes that people make under pressure; and ensure you don't cause additional anxiety on top of what people are already dealing with.

Be a Role Model

Self-care is not a luxury: It's essential. If you're tense, irritable, withdrawn, or volatile, your team may suffer similarly. If your view of reality is warped by denial, delusion, or us-and-them thinking, your team's ability to take effective action is severely curtailed. If you act out in harmful ways or make rash, inconsistent decisions, you will destroy trust and morale.

Bring your humanity front and center. Be a role model for managing inevitable human imperfection with mental flexibility, emotional openness, and healthy habits.

Mental flexibility

In a time of crisis, there is a greater need for mental acuity, as new information is constantly coming in and circumstances constantly changing. Yet this acuity is harder to achieve when you're facing stress, trauma, and fatigue, which create mental fog and a kind of cognitive tunnel vision. Keep those mental muscles limber!

At work, make a regular habit of asking for input and admitting what you don't know. Normalize and destigmatize admitting mistakes. Acknowledge conflicting impulses and values, make it OK to change your mind when new information comes in, and apologize without embarrassment when you need to.

At home, consider a personal practice to get yourself out of mental ruts. Spending time in nature, journaling, starting a new hobby, meditation — anything that uses different muscles in the brain and creates an opportunity for reflection.

Emotional openness

Acknowledge when you're having a hard time, or if you're not at the top of your game. There is a balance to be struck: A leader cannot share every passing doubt and fear. More importantly, it's better not to lean on team members for emotional reassurance. It is not their responsibility to tell you everything will be all right, or to flatter your ego. But your more tuned-in team members can already tell when you're having a bad day — you may as well admit it, so that they'll know you know, and everyone can make the appropriate adjustments.

Healthy behaviors

Ideally, you have social/emotional support outside the office — a spouse, friends, therapist, religious leader, or even a “personal board of directors.” Check in with these folks regularly! And take care of yourself in all the simple, basic ways: sleep, exercise, nutrition, hydration, mental downtime.

Make sure that your team has what they need to do these things for themselves. They likely don’t need advice on what to do, but the practical resources — time, money, equipment, access — to do it. Make self-care a regular topic of conversation — occasionally begin a meeting by asking everyone to state one good thing they’ve done for themselves, or a meaningful conversation they’ve had lately.

If your industry/corporate culture has a competitive leisure-activity ethos — “work hard, play hard” — explicitly disrupt that. If everyone is bragging about training for a Tough Mudder or racking up foreign language skills on DuoLingo over the weekend, point out that eating ice cream while watching a crime show is also a valid way to spend free time.

Lighten the Load

Stress has a cumulative impact. For the body and brain, there is no difference between deadline pressure, an argument with one’s spouse, financial worries, the dog that won’t stop barking, and the computer that keeps crashing. The patience, self-control, perspective, attentiveness, and wisdom to deal with these situations all come out of the same fund, psychologically.

And for a lot of people, that fund is in arrears. Even before the pandemic “Americans were flirting with symptoms of burnout,” physician Lucy McBride wrote in *The Atlantic*, noting that we were “among the least healthy populations in wealthy countries. Diseases of despair — including depression, anxiety, PTSD, and addiction — were already rampant.” Since Covid, “[e]very aspect of life has required added work

we've had to juggle parenting, caregiving, and working without our traditional support structures."

Reduce stressors

As much as possible, minimize stressors in your own and employees' lives. Make a positive goal out of decreasing stress, across the board, for everyone. Think of it as a psychological energy conservation plan: What can be done to conserve people's valuable cognitive and emotional energy for the most crucial tasks, at work and home? Encourage suggestions — employees may well come up with process improvements, or ideas for low-cost perks or practices that would ease their lives.

Don't add to anxiety

There may not be much that leaders can do about grief and trauma, but they can do quite a bit to create a culture that doesn't create unnecessary anxiety. People fear pain. They are anxious about looking foolish, or old and out-of-touch, or of being embarrassed.

As a leader, you can do a lot to ease — or exacerbate — these kinds of anxieties. For example, let employees know that it is OK if their home office is messy on Zoom, or if their child wanders in. (If it is not okay, explain why. "Because it doesn't look professional" is not, in 2022, a good enough reason!) In meetings, make it safe to ask questions that may seem stupid — or to simply not have any pertinent questions, or comments, or ideas to share.

Create a Cognitive Safety Net

People are spacey — have you noticed that? Grief, trauma, anxiety all can lead to losing time, focus, and endless pairs of reading glasses. Losing typical routines and

environmental cues makes it even worse, as does having to adapt to a set of changing behaviors in the rest of life, as well. Everyone is experiencing cognitive overload.

Mitigate mistakes

Acknowledge the mental burden that people are under. Create checklists, cross-check protocols, backup plans, whatever is appropriate to your particular business, to prevent serious errors. If this represents a new way of doing things, be clear that the new measures don't represent a lack of trust or confidence in the team.

This is also a time to double down on corporate culture and values. A strong shared sense of who “we” — as an organization or a team — are, what we stand for, and what we do will help decrease the number of judgment calls overwhelmed individuals have to make.

Reduce tunnel vision

Another aspect of spaciness is a tendency to focus on only one side of an issue, to get hung up on details or one's own concerns. Ensure that all aspects of a situation are being examined by using role play and other mental exercises. In another piece, we advised “[W]hen debating a course of action, have team members list all the ‘hard, cold’ reasons for a decision and then all the ‘warm, fuzzy’ reasons, or the most pessimistic/most optimistic scenarios, or the like.” Bring up hypothetical points of view — how would you explain this product to a space alien? How would people from 200 years ago solve this problem? It doesn't take much — people do better on creativity tests if they are simply asked to do things like a creative person would.

In particular, at the end of a meeting, ask “What questions would someone who really doesn't understand this issue have?” People can admit to greater vulnerability and confusion if they don't have to attribute it to themselves. (Even the most psychologically safe team may have members who are self-protective by nature.) Get

employees to talk about their pets. You might be surprised what comes up if you ask a colleague how her dog is handling her return to the office.

Learn from failure

Mistakes and failures are inevitable — especially now, as an overextended workforce tries to adapt to a constantly changing business environment. How will you deal with them?

Amy Edmondson's research shows that teams that destigmatize failure do a better job of both learning from past mistakes, and experimenting with new ways of solving problems or conducting routine business. She recommends that leaders reward, rather than metaphorically shoot, the messengers of bad news. Don't make employees afraid to admit mistakes or bring problems or unknowns to your attention. Instead, analyze failures together with your teams, and figure out ways to improve.

Make It Meaningful

Meaning matters more than happiness, especially when it comes to surviving in difficult circumstances. On the biological level, in fact, a lack of meaning itself might be a difficult circumstance. Research finds that people who have little sense of meaning in their lives, even if they are happy, have immune-response patterns similar to "people who are responding to and enduring chronic adversity."

As a leader, encourage team members to engage in meaningful activities inside and outside of work. Foster on-the-job friendships and chances to connect. Draw a clear picture of how specific tasks fit into the organizational mission, and how the organization fits into larger society. Talk about what you find meaningful in life, and how you ensure you have the time and energy for these things.

At the same time, acknowledge that meaning is not found exclusively, or even primarily, through work. Find out what non-work activities and identities matter to your team. Connect their job to those, just as you connect it to the organizational mission: a salary that sends the kids to a good school; a flexible schedule for auditions; opportunities for continuing education or travel; perks and discounts that make life with kids — or life alone — easier.

Jobs that take up a person's entire life and make up their core identity are so 20th century. A job that is a key support of a meaningful life, filled by a well-rounded, well-rested employee: This is the 21st century job.

<https://hbr.org/2022/03/leading-an-exhausted-workforce>