To Curb Burnout, Design Jobs to Better Match Employees' Needs

By Michael P. Leiter and Christina Maslach

Burnout is a response to chronic job stressors — high-frequency events embedded in workplace practices that have not been successfully managed. Over time, these stressors lead to an erosion of workers' energy, involvement, and self-confidence to the point where they feel exhausted, cynical, and ineffective in their job and "burnt out." There are many well-intentioned efforts to solve burnout in the world of work, but frequently, they address the effects of the problem — not its source. Burnout is a management and organizational issue, not a physical or mental health issue, so promoting self-care won't usually help employees recover. Think of burnt out employees as canaries in the coal mine. When the canary keels over, we acknowledge that the environment is hazardous — we don't tell the canary that it should take a long weekend.

The whole notion of burnout treatment needs to be flipped. Burnt out individuals show that there are urgent problems to be addressed at the heart of any organization. The real solution is to redesign workplaces so that the causes of burnout are no longer so frequent or intense. In other words, how can chronic job stressors be successfully managed at their source?

The answer to this question lies in improving the match, or good fit, between workers and the workplace. Yes, it is OK to help individuals cope with burnout, but it is more important to create better job matches for them. This article will show leaders and managers how to begin.

The Various Sources of Mismatches

The kinds of chronic job stressors that cause burnout — the "pebbles in your shoe" that lead to exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness — can emerge from several kinds of mismatches. These mismatches reflect a bad fit between the job and basic human needs, such as competence, belongingness, and psychological safety. Such mismatches can occur in six core areas, which apply to all people, regardless of their job:

Workload

Control

Reward

Community

Fairness

Values

A mismatch in workload often involves high demands and insufficient resources to meet those demands successfully (for example, not enough time, staff, information, equipment, etc.). A control mismatch involves inadequate autonomy to do the job well, while a reward mismatch means that good work is not receiving appropriate recognition or opportunities. Community mismatches are most extreme in socially toxic workplaces where there is incivility, bullying, or harassment, rather than mutual trust and support. A mismatch in fairness involves discrimination and inequitable practices, while a values mismatch means that there are ethical, moral, and legal conflicts in the workplace. In our book, The Burnout Challenge, we describe these six areas in more detail, in terms of both matches and mismatches, and give examples of how various organizations have worked to improve the matches. These descriptions can help readers assess which mismatches might be prevalent in their workplaces.

The six mismatches framework can be used to better understand the true nature of chronic job stressors. For example, we worked with the CEO of an 800-person organization who believed that his employees would have negative ratings about workload (because "everybody complains that it is too much") and reward (because "everybody wants a higher salary"). However, after we conducted a survey assessment of the organization, the CEO was shocked to see that instead fairness was

the most severe mismatch. One fairness-related stressor that stood out: a "distinguished service award" that employees overwhelmingly felt was rigged to be given to undeserving recipients. Once it became clear that the nomination and decision processes were widely despised and distrusted, the company set out to redesign this award and eventually agreed to a new way to recognize distinguished service and to reward it appropriately. When we visited the organization a year later to do a follow-up assessment for our research, we found that the issue of fairness was no longer a company liability. This example shows that identifying the specific area of mismatch is just as important as identifying the stressor; if the CEO had attempted to address derision about the service award as a "reward" problem, he might have exacerbated the situation by increasing the cash prize associated with it.

Another important aspect of moving from mismatches to matches is gaining flexibility. The U.S. Air Force's search for the perfect fighter jet cockpit provides a valuable lesson. In the 1950s, Air Force engineers took on a huge project to measure the exact dimensions of an average man's body (only men were Air Force pilots in those days). From length of shin to the width between a fully extended thumb and little finger, no calculation was too small. Their goal was to design a seat and instruments that would be perfect for the average person. The glitch was that they discovered there were no people who were average on all measurements. They had built a perfectly average cockpit that fit no one. To their credit, rather than give up, they turned the project on its head, and designed cockpits that were adjustable across the critical dimensions. That approach allowed people with all their distinct personal dimensions to create matches with their working environment.

This example of building flexibility around physical qualities sets us in the right direction to explore flexibility around psychological qualities in order to create better matches between workers and jobs. For example, in our research we frequently identify micromanagement by supervisors — a mismatch of control — as an employee stressor. Lack of control over when, where, and how to work frustrates people's sense of autonomy and competence. But, as with designing jet fighters, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to creating a control match. Rather than trying to generate one ideal system of control, organizations should foster a flexible dialogue that can adjust to the qualities of the supervisor, the employees, and the nature of their job.

Redesigning Jobs to Create Better Matches

Improving matches — helping people find fulfillment within an area of work life — can nudge employees away from burnout and toward engagement with work. Leaders should embrace the idea that developing their workplaces is a creative process. Fixing problems won't involve applying a single "best practice." A leader's job is not coming up with the answer; it is running a collaborative process with employees to address the persistent mismatches that employees experience at work. We recommend five critical steps:

1. Ask for input on mismatches. Although assessments often do confirm what leaders think is happening, it is important for them to be open to learning something new. The most direct route to identifying mismatches is to ask people (anonymously) about their experiences and their suggestions for how to make improvements. Administering a survey starts a conversation with employees. Their responses are their proposals for consideration by leadership. What are the chronic job stressors, and how might these be modified or eliminated?

Sometimes the message is straightforward, such as "the workload is just too much." But often the message is more nuanced. In some organizations the workload may be challenging, but there may be greater concern about the amount of autonomy employees have over what they do (a control mismatch). In other settings, people have indicated they could handle the workload if team members could work together in a more respectful and cooperative way (a community mismatch).

After asking for input, it is essential for leaders to summarize the findings and share them publicly. This is the only way to convey that "we have listened to your input, and this is what we have learned from it." In a previous HBR article, we noted that it is essential for leaders to provide feedback to employees who have taken the time to answer their survey questions.

2. Pivot to consider a range of positive matches. The next step is to develop new ways of doing things. A timely and thoughtful public presentation of the survey results for the organization as a whole, as well as for each unit, continues the conversation by shifting to the possibility of positive change. It is important to immediately ask for ideas of how to do things better. This step calls upon creative problem-solving to find viable solutions for persistent mismatches.

For example, a recent survey we administered ended with an open-ended invitation to share two ideas to improve the respondents' experience at work. The feedback presentations ended with a slide summarizing these responses. A working group can build on such ideas to develop detailed plans for change.

3. Begin with attainable goals. Often when designing better matches, it is more important to make small, tangible gains quickly, rather than to embark on a long journey toward a large gain. For example, unit managers in a hospital we visited complained of a tedious procedure for approving overtime for nurses. When such procedures were streamlined in the wake of the pandemic, the unit managers gained more time to devote to their staff and patient load. Plus, being given the authority to make these approvals demonstrated a show of trust and respect from higher-ups they hadn't felt before. This easy win improved their matches on control and workload with minimal risk or cost to the employer. Although modest in scope, the change demonstrated leadership's willingness to improve job conditions, as well as employees' potential to have a voice in decisions that affected their work life.4. Use design principles. People often describe processes that lead to mismatches as too complicated — rules and regulations that add unnecessary steps to their job and interrupt a sense of flow to their work. When redesigning jobs, simplify them wherever possible. If new tasks are being added, then other tasks need to be subtracted. Good design also balances intensity with restful periods. It alternates social involvement with deep work alone, and alternates stretches of intense concentration with periods of quiet reflection.

For jobs where remote work is possible, strict office-only and hybrid-work policies can lead to many types of mismatches. People chafe at inflexible policies that insist that everyone must come to the workplace all the time when some tasks can be done just as well at home. Developing a process with a practical rhythm of "together time" balanced against "solitary time" (perhaps remote) can have a positive effect on community, workload, fairness, and control matches.

5. Build in progress checkpoints. Whatever innovations are developed will need continual assessment, adjustment, and refinement. Real progress always involves practice and course-correction. An organizational checkup that assesses the central elements of job-person matches keeps efforts on track. Ongoing monitoring of the workplace through a process of change and continuous improvement can shift the

concept of a "job-person match" from an abstract ideal to a practical dimension of workplace management.

We have found that first-line managers are often an important pivot point for addressing mismatches, because they are in the best position to work with their employees and teams to identify problem areas and design better solutions. With sufficient latitude from upper management, they can help people adjust and customize their work environment to enable productive matches.

Rather than discovering a silver bullet to eliminate burnout, executives need a new way of thinking about leadership at work. Managing in the third decade of the twenty-first century calls for greater responsiveness to the mismatches that employees experience at work, closer attention to their psychological motivations, and greater flexibility in job design and work conditions. They must broaden their capacity for leading collaborative problem solving with employees and managers. Burned out employees signal the need to fix mismatches throughout the organization, which will have positive implications for all employees, not just a few. A recent Gallup poll found that 80% of workers worldwide are "not engaged" with their job. Although those 80% are certainly not all burned out, they likely experience some elements of exhaustion, cynicism, or inefficacy at work. Improving job-person matches does not simply avoid the most negative outcomes — rather it increases a workplace's potential to bring out the best in the workers of the future.

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