

healthyworking

A workplace wellness update

How can I avoid burnout at work?



TAKING CONTROL: SETTING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES AT WORK

Many employees aspire to become a leader at some point in their career. The chance to direct a team and co-ordinate projects can be very challenging, yet rewarding in a way that can allow your career to thrive for years to come.

But as you may have experienced, the people leader role can also be stressful. As a manager, you're expected to juggle multiple priorities and take responsibility for the quality of both your own work and your team members'. You might have to make difficult decisions, handle employee challenges and be 'on call' a lot more than you were before you became a leader, causing you to work beyond your standard hours.

What is Burnout?

With so many competing pressures and responsibilities, it's not surprising that managers and supervisors are at high risk for burnout. Burnout is a state of physical, mental or emotional exhaustion caused by long-term exposure to stress.

Leading the Way to Better Boundaries

Fortunately, burnout doesn't have to be part of your job description. By managing expectations and setting reasonable boundaries, you can take control of your workload and maximize your chances of a long, rewarding and enjoyable career.

Know your limits. Even with the best intentions, there's only so much you'll be able to reasonably accomplish each day.

Figure out how much work you can get done with realistic overtime, and look for ways to reduce your workload when it starts to approach your limit.

Just say no. If you're too busy to meet with team members or take on non-essential new assignments, don't be afraid to say no. When turning down work or a meeting, always give a reasonable explanation and, where possible, suggest some alternatives. You might, for example, offer to reschedule a meeting for a later date, or recommend giving an assignment to another qualified team member.

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Symptoms of Burnout

A person experiencing burnout loses their passion, motivation and interest in a job they once enjoyed. They begin to feel helpless, hopeless, cynical and resentful, with lower productivity and creativity. Burnout can also negatively impact your health. Studies show that burnout can lower a person's immune defences, leaving them more susceptible to illnesses ranging from the common cold and flu, to heart disease and Type 2 diabetes.

Early symptoms of burnout may include frequently feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, unimportant, unhappy, uncaring or as though every day is negative. You may also find yourself spending less and less time on previously enjoyable outside activities and relationships. If you start to notice one or more of these symptoms, don't wait to seek help. Discuss your concerns with your manager, look for ways to make your job more satisfying and manageable and maybe even consider taking some of that unused vacation time that's piling up. Hopefully though, you've not reached this point and can proactively address boundary and time management issues *before* they get out of hand.

To be a successful people leader, you have to set goals and carefully schedule your time.

These tips will help me lead my team.



Avoid micromanaging. As a people leader, your main role is to oversee the work of others and ensure that the 'big picture' comes together. Despite this, many managers spend a lot of time worrying about details better left to other team members. Trust the skills and judgement of your team and resist the temptation to hover over people to ensure every little task or decision is on target. At the same time, stay accessible and keep yourself in the loop to make sure things stay on track. Your team members will be grateful for your confidence in their ability and you'll free up valuable time for other duties.

Give it a rest. It may sound simple, but be sure to take a real lunch break. As well, try to take a couple of short breaks each day to stretch and briefly take your mind off work. While breaks may seem like wasted time, the rest will ultimately improve your mood, give you more energy and increase your productivity.

Unplug. Technology improvements to cell phones and remote desktop computer access can make it possible to work from virtually anywhere. But despite the convenience, these technologies can also make it very difficult to pull yourself away from your job. Unless absolutely necessary, try to disconnect yourself during personal times such as evenings, weekends or vacations.

Dream realistically. Working towards an ambitious, long-term career goal is a great way to keep yourself motivated, focused and ultimately achieve success. But while you may dream of a senior level promotion, putting in 70 hour work weeks to achieve it will only result in burnout. Aim high, but never sacrifice your health or personal life to get there.

Put your health first. When work gets busy, it's easy to find excuses to skip meals, choose unwholesome fast foods and cut back on physical activity. In the long run, though, an unhealthy lifestyle will only make you less productive by lowering your energy level and making you more susceptible to illness. Find convenient ways to make healthy choices, such as packing nutritious meals from home, taking the stairs or going for a daily walk.

Make time for your personal life. To be a successful people leader, you have to set goals and carefully schedule your time. If you're having difficulty balancing your work and personal life, apply the strategies you use at work to activities in your personal life. Try blocking off specific times in your schedule to spend time with friends and family, or to unwind with your favourite hobbies. Similarly, you might consider setting personal goals, such as going to the gym or visiting with friends a minimum number of times each week.

Get support. Whether it's a heart-to-heart with your mentor, meeting with your boss to manage expectations, or seeking help from a professional, working through your challenges with others can help you get perspective on your situation, set appropriate boundaries and achieve a healthy work-life balance.

When you take on a people leader role, high pressure and increased responsibilities often come with the territory. But by setting clear and reasonable boundaries, managing expectations and taking care of your health, you'll increase your ability to handle the stress that comes with the job and build a rewarding, long-term career.

Maintaining Your Workload

Manage expectations. While it may sound impressive to promise your manager top results on a tight deadline, the anxiety of meeting unrealistic demands can quickly lead to burnout. Give your manager reasonable estimates of what your team can achieve and keep him or her informed of any major issues or delays which come up. As well, it's always a good idea to budget more time and resources to a project than you think is necessary to lessen the stress of unexpected setbacks.

Set boundaries. A good people leader is always willing to mentor and assist their team members. That said, being too accessible can distract you from completing your own duties in a reasonable timeframe. Don't be afraid to set limits and openly communicate them with your team. You might, for instance, ask your team members not to interrupt you for one hour each morning and afternoon to give yourself a chance to catch-up on your workload.

Don't work alone. Your team members can be an extremely valuable resource. If you're overburdened with your own responsibilities, don't be afraid to delegate projects or lean on others for advice or assistance. People on your team may be hungry for more work and responsibility, and could offer fresh new ideas.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP. All contact between you and your EAP is completely confidential.

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