



Three ways leaders can address burnout in healthcare workers

No workforce has felt the pressure and fallout from Covid-19 more than those in healthcare. A recent BMJ study of frontline healthcare workers confirms this, reporting worryingly high levels of burnout, particularly amongst resident doctors and nurses. Notably, they found high levels of Emotional Exhaustion (38.3%), feelings of low Professional Efficacy (46.5%) and high levels of Cynicism and detached attitudes toward their job (26.5%) .

Burnout doesn't only take its toll on employees, it has severe consequences for organisations, with burnt out employees costing their employers approx. 34% of their annual salary (Gallup, 2013). Burnt out employees also have 37% higher levels of absenteeism, 18% lower productivity and 15% lower profitability. In healthcare settings, it's associated with poorer quality of care, increased professional mistakes, and higher rates of career abandonment.

So, we know burnout is bad for employees and for organisations and that it's getting worse amongst healthcare professionals. *But what can we do about it?* Below, we bring you through the first three steps any leader should take to address burnout in their organisation.¹

BURNOUT: *a state of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion brought on by prolonged or repeated occupational stress.*
/ˈbɜːn, out/

1 Understand what you're dealing with

Often times, burnout or disengagement is spoken about generally in a healthcare setting: "staff are burnt out" or "this team is really stretched." Before coming up with a plan to address burnout, it's important to understand what exactly you're dealing with. Who in the organisation should you be most concerned about? Is it the same across multiple departments or is it isolated to only a few places? Who is most at risk of leaving and who can you not afford to lose?

A comprehensive employee engagement survey is a good place to start. Looking at everything from motivation and trust to staff turnover intention,

a psychologically validated survey will uncover the pain points in your organisation, giving you the data and insights you need to get started on the areas that matter most. Be sure to leave some room for open questions. *For example, is there anything in this survey you feel we should have asked you but we didn't?* This helps to unearth any employee issues that you may not be aware of.

2 Make leadership commitment & time a top priority

Once you have your staff insights, the next step is to develop a strategy to address key burnout issues and begin to reengage employees. Two of the biggest barriers we see to implementing these strategies are *leadership commitment* and *time*. Sometimes leaders can be sceptical of the survey findings and, as a result, less committed to the process. A common response is to attribute certain findings to a small group of people that don't represent the majority or to sometimes dismiss employees as expecting too much from their employers. It's important to remind leaders that these are employee perceptions of the workplace and not necessarily the reality of the workplace. However, these perceptions do need to be addressed as not doing so can lead to certain employees becoming detractors in the organisation.

More often, leaders simply do not have the time to commit to driving and implementing the strategy. That's why it's vital during these initial planning sessions to break down what needs to be done and by whom, map out a timeline, and set clear expectations for leaders during this process. Integrating KPIs into their own performance reviews can be a good way to encourage commitment and accountability.

3 Listen to your staff and explain your decisions

Healthcare in Ireland is stretched and, naturally, employees will feel recruitment of key roles is the only answer. However, there are many internal and external reasons as to why you may not be able to hire more staff. It's paramount that you listen to your employees and explain why a certain decision can or can't be made. Is it budgetary issues? Is it access to high quality talent? If you can't look at the issue this year, could you commit to reviewing it the following year? Being open and transparent about critical decisions helps to build trust in leadership, even when those decisions are not what employees had hoped for.

¹Lasalvia A, et al. *BMJ Open* 2021; 11:e045127.
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Need help navigating burnout?

Email us today: hello@stillwater.ie

