How To Reduce Burnout:

6 Solutions to Build Workplaces that Thrive

together

an Absorb company

About Together

Together empowers organizations to accelerate their employee learning and development through mentoring programs. With 1-on-1, peer, and group mentoring, we enable organizations to level up their employee development initiatives.

Organizations leverage mentorship programs to:

- Support diversity, equity, inclusivity, and belonging initiatives
- Prepare high potential employees to take on leadership roles
- Build communities of well-trained and experienced managers
- Set up new hires for success with buddy programs
- Build meaningful connections between your remote employees

HR and L&D teams love Together because our platform offers the best user experience for employees. They don't need to learn or download a new tool because our web-based platform integrates with existing email and calendar systems to make it as easy as possible to build meaningful mentoring relationships.

Each program is fully customizable, allowing administrators to white label their program with a custom URL and branding. Together's platform includes session agendas and resources that provide employees with cues and steps to support mentors and mentees at each stage of their development. In addition, Together's dedicated Support Team provides guidance every step of the way.

Some of our customers include

airbnb

Kellogg's

randstad

Discovery

HEINEKEN

NEW YORK LIFE FOUNDATION

Want to see how we can help you bring your mentorship program to life?

Book Demo

Introduction

Burnout silently undermines all of the great work our organizations are trying to accomplish. Burnout often leads to disengaged employees, who cost their employers 34% of their annual salary[1] as a result. And the actual cost can be even greater when considering hard-to-measure costs like the loss of productivity, turnover, and top talent avoiding roles with high burnout rates.

And the pandemic only exacerbated the challenges, leading to new records[2] of burnt-out employees. It goes without saying that the individuals on our teams were dealing with heightened levels of anxiety and uncertainty and needed support in many ways.

The kind of support employees received varied across different organizations. Some viewed burnout as a personal problem. Each employee could manage themselves with the proper productivity hacks and mindfulness practices. But that wasn't enough; our teams needed more than that. Burnout isn't a personal problem—it's an organizational challenge, and leaders are waking up to their responsibility to respond to it.

This white paper will explore what burnout is, its causes, and how organizations can address it. We'll highlight one solution specifically, mentorship, because we believe the best way to help employees grow and find fulfillment in their roles is by connecting them. Of course, organizations need to address the issues of unsustainable workloads, but that's the first step. Employees also need to feel part of a community. Communities with shared values make our work more meaningful, an effective antidote to burnout.

This white paper will empower your organization to enact meaningful changes that help your employees build meaningful relationships that lead to more fulfilling jobs. Let's dive in!
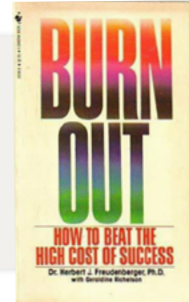
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What is Burnout?

The term "burnout" originated in the 1970s by the American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger. Freudenberger coined the term to refer to medical professionals who over-worked themselves in the service of helping others. He saw them as "exhausted, listless, and unable to cope."

An "occupational phenomenon"

Today, those same feelings of exhaustion can be present in any profession. Ambitious professionals, celebrities, overworked laborers, and homemakers can all experience burnout. For that reason, in 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) updated its definition, changing it from a "stress syn-drome" to a syndrome "resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully ma-naged."[3] The WHO also included burnout in their International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), a globally recognized diagnostic tool for the medical community.

The WHO's definition of burnout highlights that they classified it as an **occupational phenomenon**, not a medical condition. The classification was a turning point in asserting organizations' responsibility to address burnout among their employees.

We'll talk more about this in the section, *Burnout is an organizational–not individual–problem*, but before we get there, let's look at symptoms of burnout.

Symptoms of burnout

The Mayo Clinic[4] suggests several questions to ask yourself to determine if you're experiencing burnout:

- Have you become cynical or critical at work?
- Do you drag yourself to work and have trouble getting started?
- Have you become irritable or impatient with co-workers, customers or clients?
- Do you find it hard to concentrate?
- Do you lack satisfaction from your achievements?
- Do you feel disillusioned about your job?
- Are you using food, drugs or alcohol to feel better or to simply not feel?
- Have your sleep habits changed?
- Are you troubled by unexplained headaches, stomach or bowel problems, or other physical complaints?

Answering yes to several of these questions may indicate that you're experiencing burnout. Burnout is more pronounced than tiredness at work. It's prolonged. And the effects of burnout don't just remain at work. It spills over into other areas of your life and health.

Here are the physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms[5] of burnout:

Physical symptoms of burnout

- Feeling tired and drained most of the time.
- Lowered immunity, frequent illnesses.
- Frequent headaches or muscle pain.
- Change in appetite or sleep habits.

Emotional symptoms of burnout

- Sense of failure and self-doubt.
- Feeling helpless, trapped, and defeated.
- Increasingly cynical and negative outlook.
- Detachment, feeling alone in the world.
- Loss of motivation.
- Decreased satisfaction and sense of accomplishment.

Behavioral symptoms of burnout

- Withdrawing from responsibilities.
- Isolating yourself from others.
- Procrastinating, taking longer to get things done.
- Using food, drugs, or alcohol to cope.
- Taking out your frustrations on others.
- Skipping work or coming in late and leaving early.

Stress or burnout?

You may view burnout as prolonged stress, and you're not wrong. But stress makes us overly reactive whereas burnout causes us to shut down:

Stress.	Burnout.
Over-engagement	Disengagement
Emotions are overreactive	Emotions are blunted
Produces urgency and hyperactivity	Produces helplessness and hopelessness
Loss of energy	Loss of motivation, ideals, and hope
Leads to anxiety disorders	Leads to detachment and depression

Causes of Burnout

Since Herbert Freudenberger's work in the 70s, there's been a lot more research into the causes of burnout. The viewpoints on specific causes vary, but they all include common themes. Let's compare two studies into the causes of burnout. The first is Gallup, a global analytics firm recognized for its insight into employee engagement. The second is Christina Maslach[6], a social psychologist seen as the foremost expert on burnout. She developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)[7], a gold standard for measuring burnout.

Comparing research into the causes of burnout show several similarities

Gallup A survey of 7,500 full-time employees[8]	Christina Maslach Six leading causes from her research[9]
• Unmanageable workload • Unfair treatment at work • Lack of role clarity • Lack of communication and support from their manager • *Unreasonable time pressure*	• Unsustainable workload • Lack of fairness • Perceived lack of control • Lack of a supportive community • *Mismatched values and skills* • *Insufficient rewards for effort*

Researchers agree that **workload**, **fairness**, **control**, **clarity**, **support**, and **community** play a pivotal role in burnout. Another insight is that all of the causes listed except one (*mismatched values and skills*) are external pressures, meaning pressures from our workplaces. The research clarifies that burnout is an organizational issue, and they play a significant role in mitigating or reinforcing it.

Burnout Is An Organizational–Not Individual–Problem

In the past, employers viewed burnout as a personal problem that employees could solve with various self-help strategies. The view was that employees could take care of themselves by leveraging productivity hacks to get their work done faster and adopting mindfulness practices to remain calm when managing an unreasonable workload. The problem was not their work but themselves.

> " Although it's beneficial to build strategies to remain productive and focused, they don't address the root causes outlined by Gallup and Christina Maslach (see section on Causes of Burnout). Their research recognizes burnout for what it really is: a product of our workplace culture."

The HBR article, *Employee Burnout Is a Problem with the Company, Not the Person*[10] Eric Garton, a Bain & Company partner and author, says that the organization is to blame for burnt-out teams. In his research for his book, *Time, Talent, Energy: Overcome Organizational Drag and Unleash Your Team's Productive Power*, he looked inside companies with high burnout rates and saw three common themes:

1. Excessive collaboration. Garton saw that there were too many decision-makers. He noted endless rounds of meetings and conference calls to ensure that every stakeholder was heard and aligned. Additionally, the "always-on" workplace culture leads to senior executives receiving 200 or more emails per day[11] and employees context-switching[12] so much between tasks that productivity plummets and stress spikes. Further, research from Gallup[13] shows burnout increases significantly as employees work more than 50 hours a week.

2. Weak time management disciplines. In the companies he studied, Garton saw that employees were left on their own to figure out how to reduce their stress and burnout. He found that most executives have an opportunity to liberate at least 20%[14] of their employees' time by bringing greater discipline to time management. One way they could do this was by giving employees more autonomy. He found it as one of the greatest sources of organizational energy.

3. A tendency to overload the most capable with too much work. In one company Garton investigated, managers lost one day of their week to emails and two days a week to meetings. For highly talented managers, they'll lose even more time to collaboration as their overwork earns them more responsibility and an even larger workload. It was the equivalent of hockey coaches keeping their best line on the ice all game.

Here's the rub: If you're a leader, burnout is your problem. You have the responsibility to champion a culture that doesn't see burnout as a badge of honor. Instead, your organization needs to recognize burnout as a plight to your company's productivity and well-being. With that said, let's look at actionable ways to mitigate burnout.

How Organizations Can Address Burnout

It's no surprise that doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals experienced burnout at much greater levels during the pandemic. Despite the high levels of burnout across the board for hospitals, one hospital, in particular, had less pronounced levels. The Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) in Boston recognized that burnout was a major risk for their staff in the early days of the pandemic.

In an HBR article[15] on their approach to mitigating burnout among their staff, they identified six categories. These categories aligned with the factors that Christina Maslach's research revealed drive employee engagement and reduce burnout:

Rewarding work	Fairness and transparency	A sense of community
Autonomy	A reasonable workload	Consistent values

Rewarding work

MGH knew that salaries only motivated staff so much. On top of maintaining their compensation, MGH made a concerted effort to remind everyone of their work's impact. They'd do this in a couple of ways:

Updating staff on COVID patients' positive outcomes after they left their units.	Collecting and sharing positive feedback from their patients.

MGH noted that consistently reminding staff of their impact helped maintain employees' resilience during the most challenging days of the pandemic.

In MGH's case, they'd reminded employees of their positive impact on patients' lives with feedback and updates.

Mentorship and rewarding work

Another way to make work more meaningful is to connect employees with senior leadership for mentoring opportunities. Leaders often have more context on how business operations contribute to the mission of the organization.

For example, pairing a junior employee who's still early in their career with a senior manager can open up opportunities for the manager to broaden their mentee's perspective. The mentor can explain the significance of their role by explaining how things would fall apart without them there.

> ❝ *This mentorship program provides a great exchange for us to share our experiences and discuss problems in our careers. We're learning from our different regional/cultural/work-life experiences and brainstorming resolutions to some of our challenges."*
>
> **Mentor from a program run on Together's platform**

Providing mentoring opportunities to employees makes their work more meaningful because they have a more senior member to glean new perspectives from.

Autonomy

The Massachusetts General Hospital recognized that the restrictions imposed by the pandemic impeded a lot of the control people had over their lives. A perceived lack of control, as Christina Maslach identified, can quickly lead to burnt-out employees. To mitigate this risk, MGH did three things.

Firstly, in the context of the pandemic, they knew employees needed to feel safe before they could feel in control. So they implemented many Covid protocols for employee safety.

Secondly, MGH gave employees autonomy to decide how they worked best. They did this by allowing employees to choose whether or not they wanted to adopt a virtual care option to decrease face-to-face contact.

Lastly, MGH encouraged individuals to bring their own ideas to the table if they found a way to make things more efficient or safe.

By ensuring your organization is (1) meeting the basic needs of employees, (2) giving people options, and (3) welcoming their ideas and feedback, you'll give employees more sense of control and autonomy over their work.

Supporting autonomy through mentorship

Providing employees with mentors can give employees more confidence and autonomy over their careers. That's because mentors encourage us to pursue our career goals and help us overcome obstacles that inevitably come up.

> ❝ *I could not have imagined a better fit— my mentor's experience and approach is exactly what I was hoping for. She is approachable, down to earth and helped me set clear expectations. I left our first session feeling energized and empowered to keep working on my personal goals."*
>
> **Mentee from a program run on Together's platform**

Having a support person in your career gives employees more confidence and a sense of agency. Hard things don't seem as hard after you can talk it through with a mentor.

Fairness and transparency

Fairness and transparency are prerequisites for healthy workplaces. One of the best ways to ensure employees know they are being treated fairly is to open lines of communication. Instead of top-down directives telling employees what they're going to do, explain the why and how behind your decisions.

Communicate your reasons, be open to feedback from others, and make sure your organization is equitable. A surefire way to jeopardize fairness and transparency is to close lines of communication and let employees speculate on what is being discussed behind closed doors.

Increase transparency with mentorship

Mentorship almost guarantees fairness and transparency across your organization because equitably providing all employees with mentoring opportunities opens lines of communication. Employees can share their ideas and feedback with their mentors. In this way, helpful feedback can quickly climb chains of command and enact change. It gives employees a voice.

A reasonable workload

It's a difficult balance to ensure employees have enough work to keep them engaged and challenged to grow without giving them so much that they're overworked. As a leader, refer back to the previous three points. Be transparent with them about their workload. Invite their feedback and ask them if it's sustainable. This will give employees more autonomy and clarity on their roles, which reduces the risk of burnout. They'll also feel more confident that the workload is fair when they've been given more control over how they do their work.

Leveraging mentors to make work more manageable

By pairing employees with mentors, organizations can ensure employees have the support they need to thrive in their roles. They'll have someone to talk through their challenges with and receive guidance from. Insights from feedback forms submitted after each mentoring session on Togeher's platform show both mentors and mentees feel more energized after their meetings. Mentorship can increase employee engagement and lead to more productive and fulfilled teams.

> *My mentor is Awesome! As a new employee, I really appreciate being partnered with someone knowledgeable in the spaces in which I need to focus."*
>
> **Mentee from a program run on Together's platform**

A sense of community

Throughout this white paper, We've noted that employees need to feel a part of a community when they come to work. This is especially true for remote or hybrid workplaces. There are more opportunities for individuals to feel isolated and alone while working from home. When this happens, productivity will quickly plummet as employees find it more difficult to find meaning in their work.

Mentoring programs build meaningful communities

Mentoring programs are an effective way to build community across organizations—especially large companies with multiple locations. A formal mentoring program can connect employees across departments or locations.

And it doesn't have to be only senior leaders with junior employees.

Many organizations are building **peer mentoring programs** where employees on similar seniority levels but on different teams make time each month to connect. They share advice, talk through ideas, work out solutions, and support each other. Peer mentoring is also a common way to provide new hires with an onboarding buddy to help them get acquainted with their role.

Likewise, **group mentoring programs** are becoming a common way for organizations to build a sense of community. Employee resource groups (ERGs) or new manager programs help employees of similar backgrounds or career stages meet one another and receive mentorship from more experienced employees.

> *This program is a wonderful way to meet other colleagues at our company that I'd otherwise not have the opportunity to talk with."*
>
> **Mentee from a program run on Together's platform**

There are many different types of mentoring programs companies can choose to run. All of which can successfully be the catalyst for meaningful relationships to form. Employee mentoring programs, in turn, mitigate employee burnout.

Consistent values

When the values of employees and the organization are at odds, it's bound to lead to disillusionment. It's a recipe for conflict and frustration, which causes burnout. For organizations to get employees on board with their values, they need to give them a sense of community. Employees will get behind the organization when they know that it's made up of people who care about them and who they care about. Likewise, employees will find their roles fulfilling if they have rewarding work, believes that their leaders value their ideas and contributions, and trusts them by giving them autonomy in their role.

Mentoring programs align values

1-on-1 mentorship can make employees feel more ingrained in the culture and its values. Employees will build meaningful relationships with their mentors as they get valuable guidance from them. As they grow, they'll see their work as rewarding and the organization as a place that's good for them. Employees are less likely to burn out if they love their jobs.

> *I am very happy with my mentor. She seems eager to help and very genuine. I am excited to continue talking with her and learning from her."*
>
> **Mentee from a program run on Together's platform**

Mitigating Burnout In Your Organization With Mentorship

It's likely that in every organization, there is some form of mentorship taking place. A leader will take a promising employee under their wing to help them realize their potential. These employees stand to benefit from their mentor's advice, guidance and professional network. A formal mentoring program can make mentorship more equitable—every employee has the opportunity to be mentored.

Consider these statistics:

- 71% of Fortune 500 companies have mentoring programs.[16]
- 90% of workers who have a career mentor say they're happy in their job.[17]
- 25% of employees who enrolled in a mentoring program had a salary grade change, compared to only 5% of workers who did not participate.[18]
- Mentees are promoted 5 times more often than those without mentors.[19]
- Mentors are 6 times more likely to be promoted.[20]
- 89% of those with mentors believe their colleagues value their work, compared with 75% who do not have mentors.[21]
- 87% of mentors and mentees feel empowered by their mentoring relationships and have developed greater confidence[22]

The numbers are compelling. Organizations that want thriving teams need mentorship. The result of an organization that invests in mentorship is a workforce that:

- Finds their work more rewarding
- Empowers employees to drive their careers forward
- Is more transparent
- Gives employees the confidence to overcome challenges
- Has a meaningful sense of community
- Have values that are aligned

All of these outcomes significantly contribute to less burnout among employees. There's so much upside to starting a mentorship program. There are many structures workplace mentoring programs can take. There is:

1-on-1 mentorship	**Peer mentorship**	**Group mentoring**
between leaders and more junior employees (high potential programs, leadership development, succession planning).	between employees at similar career stages (new hire buddy programs, connecting remote teams).	where a senior leader mentors several mentees (new manager training, onboarding, employee resource groups).

The goals behind mentoring programs can also vary. At Together, we see mentoring programs designed to:

- Develop high potential employees to take on leadership roles
- Support diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging initiatives like ERGs
- Train new managers to take on their new role
- Set up new hires for success with onboarding buddy programs
- Build more connected cultures in remote or hybrid workplaces

What's next?

To continue learning about mentorship, check out our other white papers, blogs, and webinars, where we explore the benefits and applications of mentorship. And if you're ready to learn more about starting your own mentorship program:

Get in touch with us

Resources

- Measuring Return on Investment of Mentoring [white paper]
- Examples of Successful Mentoring Programs [blog]
- Best Practices for Running A Mentorship Program [white paper]
- Round-Table: Mentorship Program Admins Share Best Practices [Webinar]
- How do I promote my mentoring program? [blog]
- How To Start A Group Mentoring Program [blog]
- The Definitive Guide to High Potential Talent Programs [white paper]

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