How to avoid workplace burnout in post-recession times.

EMPLOYEES WHO HAVE REMAINED ON THE PAYROLL after the most recent economic downturn may be feeling the stress of decreased resources and increased burdens. Some may still even carry “survivor guilt.” Emotional strain can also rise through factors such as unrealistic expectations, workplace politics or ill-defined goals.

No matter what is causing the stress, employers need to know how to recognize it and help fight employee fatigue before it establishes a permanent dysfunctional position in the workplace.

Chronic stress has a number of warning signs that employers can read, according to Dr. Katy Kamkar, a clinical psychologist and acting treatment head of the Work, Stress and Health Program at the Centre for Addiction & Mental Health in Toronto. These include depressed mood, feelings of agitation, difficulty concentrating and making decisions, and possibly an increased use of alcohol and stimulants. It also affects employees physically, causing such symptoms as headaches, stomach problems and sleep loss. These mental, emotional and physical manifestations of stress can lead to increased absenteeism and decreased productivity.

“Stress in the workplace occurs when demands are too high and we don’t perceive we have enough resources to cope,” Kamkar says. With fewer workers, there is pressure to do more with fewer resources. “If the demands are too high, it could lead to burnout and exhaustion.”

In this “new normal” economy there can be confusion about exactly what tasks the “survivors” are supposed to perform in the restructured workplaces. If new responsibilities are not well defined, it can increase uncertainty and add to the stress.

When organizations focus exclusively on economic survival (as has happened in many organizations over the last year and a half), opportunities for promotion and growth often get curtailed and job satisfaction often plummets. “People want to know how their job contributes to the welfare of the organization. [They] want to feel they are making a valuable contribution and are recognized by the employer for this,” says Mary Ann Baynton, program director of the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace.

There are steps employers can take to help alleviate some of this stress. These steps may also help boost morale and create more certainty around the office—two workplace elements that also plummet during and after a recession.

Communicate

The first basic step in warding off fatigue and stress is to convey to employees that you recognize the crunch they are experiencing, says Dr. Joti Samra, a clinical psychologist and research scientist with the Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addiction at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C. “[Many executives] may not even talk about these issues. They’re swept under the carpet because they think somehow they will make things worse or that they will be on the hook to do something,” she says.
According to Samra, simply acknowledging that employees are under increased stress, that jobs have been eliminated or that vacant positions are not being filled can go a long way. “It can be appropriate to say ‘We realize people are overworked, but we are not in a position to change that at this time,’ [or] to say ‘We realize the situation is not the ideal—what can we do to help and make the current situation more manageable?’”

When a company or department must undergo changes, managers should communicate these changes clearly and give employees as much explanation as possible about why decisions have been made. “If they just get water-cooler gossip, that actually creates more fear and anxiety,” Samra says.

**Involve and Educate**
The next step is to get input from employees and, when possible, involve them in the decision-making. “Demonstrate your commitment to listening to employees,” Samra urges. Often managers don’t ask employees what they need due to a fear of what employees might say. “You’re going to hear 20 things you should be doing differently, and you can’t do all that. The reality is that most people are pretty reasonable. You can go a long way by talking openly.”

Another important step is building strong relationships between managers and employees—showing respect, being open and candid, responding to each other’s needs—these things can reduce stress at zero cost, according to Samra. An employee's relationship with his or her immediate supervisor is especially important, she adds. “Educate supervisors. Get some support for those folks. That will go a long way in enhancing relationships.”

**Flexibility and Balance**
Providing a means to better help employees balance their life responsibilities with their increased workloads can also do everyone a world of good. Employees, especially those with children or elderly parents, appreciate flexible work arrangements and since so many people have competing priorities, flexibility can make a huge difference in loyalty and stress reduction. Dr. George T. Kaoukis with the department of clinical health psychology at St. Boniface General Hospital in Winnipeg, has found that approximately one quarter of the workforce has expressed worries about achieving a good work/life balance. He suggests the following to employers and managers:

1. **Encourage employees to make a peaceful transition from work to home.** “After work, people can go to the gym [or] do family errands. Some people just take 10 minutes to sit in their driveway. People need to make the transition from work to home very clear.”

2. **Help employees “to be unplugged” if possible.** When employees are away from the office, they shouldn’t feel as though they need to check their email or have their

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**Speaking Clearly With Employee Communication**

Westminster Savings Credit Union in New Westminster, B.C., takes steps to inoculate its workers against unnecessary stress.

As one of Canada’s largest credit unions with 400 employees spread across 12 retail branches, the company ensures that it communicates clearly to its employees. “For example,” says Joanna Whalley, manager of people engagement, “Barry Forbes, our CEO, made the very bold commitment to all our employees that there would be no layoffs.” She adds that the media surrounding the numerous layoffs in her industry had potential to create substantial unease at the credit union. “This was a very important message to help put our employees at ease, and we wanted to get that message out as clearly as possible.”

While the announcement left Westminster employees breathing a sigh of relief, Whalley notes that many of its staffers have friends, family members and customers who were hit by the recession.

To help employees further ease employee fears, Westminster Savings held resiliency workshops to talk about the causes of stress and ways to alleviate it. “We even talked about simple ways to cope every day, like breathing exercises, sleep and eating habits. There was a lot of very good dialogue exchanged,” she says.

After the workshop, the company offered one-on-one follow-up sessions for any employee who needed to talk further and published information on its intranet. It also regularly reminds employees of its employee assistance program.

Westminster Savings trains its managers on how to recognize signs of stress and how to point employees in the right direction if their stress is becoming unmanageable.
BlackBerry at the kitchen table. “Lead by example. Unfortu-
nately, management often is one of the worst violators.”

3 **Encourage employees to develop new job skills and to take advantage of professional development opportunities.** Help them devise their own career path. “That gives them some sense of power. It gets them away from feeling trapped.”

4 **Encourage employees not to put all their eggs in the workplace basket.** Employees need to have a diversified sense of self that encompasses the family and the community and nurtures their physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. In other words, there needs to be life beyond the cubicle.

5 **Teach stress management/time management techniques if needed.** Help harried employees find ways to get a little breathing room. For example, show them how to handle email and voice mail and work more efficiently overall.

6 **Allow time for the occasional break.** “People often are engaged in marathon schedules. They need a break after about two and a half hours; they need an activity that is different from the task they have been engaged in,” he says. “There’s a myth about breaks that they rob you of productivity, but people [who take breaks] are less vulnerable to burnout.

Corporate cultures vary, but I think the message is getting through that the old way of doing things doesn’t work. In the long run, a break is an investment that pays off in productivity.”

**Structured Programs**

Mental health experts note that sometimes employees need more structured help, such as employee assistance programs (EAPs) or individual counselling. “At times when things feel overwhelming and we start suffering, it’s important not to suffer in silence and to get appropriate help,” Kamkar says.

Unfortunately, Baynton says, most companies don’t take full advantage of their EAP. Companies know they should have an EAP, so they put one in place, but often they are not mining the many benefits to employees and their families—and the employer—that come with the service. “For example, many managers don’t know that they can call the EAP for help with an employee problem,” she explains.

To effectively reduce workplace stress and fatigue, it’s best to focus on two essential components, Baynton emphasizes. One is the employer’s commitment to providing a psychologically safe environment and stress management resources. The other is the individual employee’s determination to build resiliency.

“You need both, and you need to make the link between them. I bridle at the idea that it’s all about resiliency. But neither is it fair to say that the employer is responsible for every part of the employee’s life.” Reducing stress is a two-way street and it’s one that employees and employers need to share.

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