

Are You Burning Out Your Best Employees?

As businesses strive to achieve greater productivity, employees are being asked to work harder than ever. “Giving 110%” isn’t just encouraged during special projects—it has become a daily requirement. While having staff increase their efficiency can be valuable for both the company and

each individual, it can lead to burnout if taken to extremes for long periods of time.

Your top performers are often at greatest risk for problems associated with workplace stress. They are frequently given the most challenging projects because of their talent, ability to make meaningful contributions to the team, and willingness to put in the extra effort. These staff members may also be asked to cover vacant positions in the company because of their skill at managing multiple priorities. Their level of commitment and drive to succeed is no doubt an asset to your firm, but it can also prevent them from seeking assistance when they are overwhelmed. Highly motivated individuals may see it as a sign of weakness or failure to admit they are struggling to keep up with their growing to-do lists.

To prevent burnout, you must be proactive in learning how your employees are managing their workloads. This makes ongoing communication essential. Here are some specific strategies that can help.

- **Stay connected.** If you aren’t already doing so, request that all staff members submit regular activity reports. They don’t have to be lengthy, but these lists can help you identify potential problems early on. For instance, a staff accountant on your team may be making small progress on a large number of projects but failing to complete several of them. In this case, the employee may have so much on her plate that she can’t spend adequate time on each initiative. You may need to step in and help prioritize or reassign part of her workload to get things back on track.
- **Take note of assignments not getting done.** Small signs frequently offer the biggest clues that someone is overworked and on the road to burnout. When people are too busy, routine responsibilities get put on hold. While evaluating activity reports, make sure employees are devoting time to some second- and third-tier priorities as well as to key projects.
- **Be supportive.** Stop by your team members’ desks regularly to ask about their workloads. Your best employ-



ees will be more willing to admit problems if they know that you will take some form of action to help them and that there will be no negative career repercussions. Establish a consistent pattern of support when staff members seek assistance, whether through reorganizing job responsibilities, redistributing work to other employees or temporary accounting professionals, or providing access to necessary training. Solicit input from those involved to show that you value their suggestions for ways to resolve the situation.

- **Delegate selectively.** It's tempting to single out your best people, but when assigning tasks to your team, avoid giving too much to one person or a small group of individuals. This will save your

star performers from possible burnout and give others on your team the opportunity to sharpen their skills.

- **Help staff recharge.** People are at far greater risk for burnout if they fail to take breaks, which often happens as demands increase. Your employees may feel that they are able to accommodate more work this way, but they are actually sacrificing efficiency. Be sure to remind them of the value of periodic time away from their desks, and set the example by taking breaks yourself. Also encourage your team to take occasional vacations to refresh. Here, too, as a manager, you should lead by example.
- **Keep it light.** Having a sense of humor helps build rapport and

trust with staff, which in turn facilitates open communication and a positive work environment. Both are important elements in reducing stress. Laughter can also alleviate tension caused by tight deadlines and difficult projects.

- **Watch for signals of burnout.** Despite your best efforts, employees still may not tell you when there are problems. Observe workplace patterns carefully, and take note of any changes in behavior among your star performers. Are they turning in projects late? Do they seem less patient? Are they regularly forgetful? Are interpersonal conflicts on the rise? These are all indicators that stress levels could be too high.

While you may not be able to eliminate the pressures associated with heightened demands in each situation, you *can* create an environment in which staff members feel supported. Stay connected with your employees, proactively identify potential workload problems, and offer solutions. You will minimize burnout on your team and help ensure your group can continue achieving business objectives. ■

Max Messmer is chairman and CEO of Robert Half International Inc. (RHI), parent company of Robert Half® Finance & Accounting, Accountemps®, and Robert Half® Management Resources. RHI is the world's first and largest specialized staffing firm placing accounting and finance professionals on a full-time, temporary, and project basis. Messmer's most recent books are Motivating Employees For Dummies® and Managing Your Career For Dummies® (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).