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ABSTRACT
        This paper examines a vareity of individual, group,
and organizational communication skills for dealing with job burnout.
Primary emphasis is placed on techniques for: (1) gaining
perspective; (2) resolving substantive and affective conflict; (3)
developing social support systems; and (4) increasing constructive
feedback and employee control. Twenty-four references are attached.
(KEH)

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WORKSHOP: COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES
FOR COPING WITH JOB BURNOUT

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Burnout causes major problems for both
individuals and organizations. The
author advocates approaching the preven-
tion and treatment of burnout from a
combination of individual, group and
organizational perspectives. In each
area, the communication skills necessary
to prevent or reduce burnout are
presented. Primary emphasis is placed
on techniques for: gaining perspective,
resolving substantive and affective
conflict, developing social support
systems and increasing constructive
feedback and employee control.

In ancient China, the symbol for stress
included two written characters - one
for danger and one for opportunity.
Stress can be helpful or harmful depend-
ing upon its intensity, frequency and
upon how it is mediated. Unmediated
stress is "the number one health problem
in the U.S. today." (Cedoline, p. 4)

Burnout is one of the problems resulting
from unmediated stress. If a previously
committed individual experiences
physical and emotional exhaustion
centered around his work brought on by
unrelieved demands (internal or
external; positive or negative), he is
experiencing burnout. Burnout is a
loss of will, motivation, idealism,
moral purpose or commitment at work.
You can't burn out if you have never
been on fire. Overcommitted individuals
are most likely to experience the gradual
process of detachment or disengagement
from work brought on by an imbalance
between resources and demands. The

greater the consequences of failure to
meet demands, the greater the distress.
Dr. Edward Stambaugh, a practicing
clinical psychologist who specializes
in treating job burnout victims,
estimates that as many as 10 percent
of Americans succumb to the effects of
burnout every year. (Cedoline, p. 17)
A recent survey of 9,000 workers from
21 organizations conducted by Robert
Golembiewski, management professor at
the University of Georgia, reports that
15 percent were moderately burned out
and that 45 percent felt high levels
of emotional exhaustion. (USA Today,
Dec. 23, 1985, p. 1D)

The most common symptoms of job burnout
include:

1) A loss of feeling and concern for
    ones co-workers. Poor peer and
    group relationships and withdrawal
    from or irritability with co-
    workers.

2) Detachment with clients, failure
    to initiate contact with clients;
    labeling clients as objects: or
    offering short or rude answers to
    clients.

3) Diminished frustration tolerance
    in carrying out job responsibil-
    ities.

4) Increasing rigidity on the job.

5) Negative job attitudes including
    constant complaining, cynicism,
    irritability, moodiness, and
    paranoia.

6) Lack of energy on the job. Less
    effectiveness at work due to
    apathy, carelessness, emotional
    exhaustion, clockwatching, tardi-
    ness and absenteeism.

7) Questioning ones career goals and
    decisions.

8) Increasing disorientation includ-
    ing forgetfulness, low concentra-
    tion, stumbling speech patterns.

9) Physical problems are several times
    as frequent in burnout victims.
    Such problems include illness,
    headaches, backaches, ulcers, high
    blood pressure, allergies, sleep
    problems. (Veninga, p. 109)

10) Increased problems off the job including excessive eating, drinking or drugs, decreased social contacts, marital discord.

The consequences to the individual are often synonomous with the symptomology. Burnout is also exceptionally debilitating to the organization. It has been linked with high personnel turnover, friction with both co-workers and supervisors and increased dissatisfaction with both the job and the unit. Burnout has been linked with job withdrawal, decreases in productivity and absenteeism. (Jackson, p. 61)

The prevention and treatment of burnout assume increasing importance as we become more aware of the debilitating consequences for both individuals and organizations. Clearly prevention is better and cheaper than treatment. The prevention and treatment of burnout are best handled by utilizing a combination of individual, group and organizational approaches. Two recent studies indicate that individual coping alone is less effective in dealing with job-related strain than a combined approach. (Farber, p. 237) The best coper analyzes each situation as unique and adapts the most effective strategy to that situation. The complexity of causation for burnout requires avoidance of a narrow perspective in dealing with the problem. Approaching coping only from a perspective of management training, biofeedback, relaxation therapy, etc. is generally too limited. (Farber, pp. 15-17) However, since the role of communication training in combatting job burnout has received little attention in the literature, this paper will examine a variety of individual, group and organizational communication skills for dealing with job burnout.

ARE YOU BURNING OUT?

All individuals experience one or more of these symptoms occasionally. The key to recognizing burnout lies in identifying the frequency and severity of the symptomology. Several scholars have developed tests for job burnout. Take the following test. Try to be honest with yourself.

Look back over the past six months. Have you been noticing changes in yourself or in the world around you? Think of the office. . .the family. . .social situations. Allow about 30 seconds for each answer. Then assign it a number from 1 (for no or little change) to 5 (for a great deal of change) to

designate the degree of change you perceive.

1) Oo you tire more easily? Feel fatigued rather than energetic?

2) Are people annoying you by telling you, "You don't look so good lately"?

3) Are you working harder and harder and accomplishing less and less?

4) Are you increasingly cynical and disenchanted?

5) Are you often invaded by a sadness you can't explain?

6) Are you forgetting? (appointments, deadlines, personal possessions)

7) Are you increasingly irritable? More short-tempered? More disappointed in the people around you?

8) Are you seeing close friends and family members less frequently?

9) Are you too busy to do even routine things like make phone calls or read reports or send out your Christmas cards?

10) Are you suffering from physical complaints? (aches, pains, headaches, a lingering cold)

11) Do you feel disoriented when the activity of the day comes to a halt?

.12) Is joy elusive?

13) Are you unable to laugh at a joke about yourself?

14) Does sex seem like more trouble than its worth?

15) Do you have very little to say to people?

Very roughly, now, place yourself on the Burn-Out scale. Keep in mind that this is merely an approximation of where you are, useful as a guide on your way to a more satisfying life. Don't let a high total alarm you, but pay attention to it. Burn-Out is reversible, no matter how far along it is. The higher number signifies that the sooner you start being kinder to yourself, the better.

THE BURN-OUT SCALE

0-25   You're doing fine.

3

26-35   There are things you should
         be watching.

36-50   You're a candidate.

51-65   You are burning out.

INDIVIDUAL COPING METHODS

Realign Your Perceptions

One's perceptions of self, co-workers,
clients, and the job are major factors
in causing or combatting burnout. Our
perceptions of self often affect our
distress. Develop your self-esteem by
seeking positive feedback, using
positive self talk, doing things you
do well, and focusing on what you have
done well at the end of the day.

Burnout victims often accentuate the
negative about themselves and eliminate
the positive. The typical burnout was
a successful, motivated, committed,
valued, and idealistic worker. These
positive qualities are often devalued
or ignored by the burnout, viewing the
world through distress-colored glasses.
Anger, helplessness, hopelessness,
frustration, cynicism, negative job
attitudes, apathy, a sense of worthless-
ness, etc., dominate the consciousness
of a burnout victim.

We play a large role in controlling
our burnout. It is often more appropri-
ate to use a mirror instead of a
telescope in analyzing burnout. "We
cannot expect others to make things
better for us, but we can make them
better for ourselves." (Maurice, p.
36) We can avoid or reduce the powerless
thinking that inflames burnout by
changing our appraisals or by reinter-
preting the data.

1) Don't set unattainable goals.
    Eliminate deadwood demands, and
    develop realistic expectations of
    what you have to achieve. Train
    yourself to set realistic goals.
    (Pines, p. 162)

2) Avoid social comparison. Develop
    a realistic personal definition of
    success and failure. (Pines, pp.
    147-148)

3) Take a more detached view of
    yourself on the job. Step back
    and mentally observe you or someone
    else doing your job.

4) Analyze your present job and
    realistic alternatives. Perhaps
    the grass is greener at your present

job. Learn to appreciate what you have.
On the other hand, do not be afraid to
change jobs or locations.

5) Put distance between yourself and
    your job. Do not make your self-
    concept too dependent on your
    occupation lest any criticism of
    your work "becomes a rejection of
    who you are rather than what you
    have done." (Freudenberger, p.
    176)

6) Take primary responsibility for
    yourself and your job. Get out
    of the habit of blaming others
    for your problems. If things are
    not going well on the job, analyze
    your role in problem creation.
    Try to do things because you choose
    to rather than because you ought
    to. Try to delete "I can't from
    your vocabulary and replace it with
    "I won't." Using language like
    "I choose" and "I won't" places
    primary responsibility for your
    behavior on you. Changing the
    way you relate to others is much
    easier than changing others. You
    can make things better for yourself
    if you resist self-defeating
    perceptions of helplessness and
    hopelessness.

"We do not believe that people can take
complete control of their perceptions
of stress and thereby render every form
of work stress powerless. For millions
of people, the best, perhaps the only
option, is to change the stress itself.
However, we believe that most people
can make significant changes in their
perceptual practices. We can consider
other possible definitions of the
situation. And, if successful, it can
give us dramatic and lasting relief
from work stress." (Veninga, p. 91)
D. H. Lawrence described the perceptual
practices of one of his characters:
"Poor Richard Lovatt worried himself
to death; struggling with the problem
of himself and calling it Australia."
(Lawrence, pp. 129-130) Many a burnout
has struggled with the problem of himself
and called it the job, the boss, the
client, or the co-worker. To paraphrase
Thoreau, as long as a burnout mismanages
his perceptions, he is apt to mismanage
everything else. Burnout victims
frequently exhibit a distorted view of
reality. They must learn to define
problems and situations more accurately
since the terminology of the question
often determines the answer.

Burnouts must also learn that the
pers   al and projective nature of their

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perceptions determine their definitions of reality.

Listen Empathically

Active empathic listening is often helpful in combatting occupational burnout. The average person spends approximately 40 percent of his waking day listening. However, over "30 years of research clearly indicates that we listen at approximately 25% effectiveness and efficiency." (Steil, p. 38) Research supporting the importance of listening is rapidly expanding. Wolvin, pp. 21-22 and Steil, pp. 9-10 cite studies of listening in business that conclude:

1) Active listening is the most critical managerial competency. (Smith, 1978)

2) Poor listening is the number one communication barrier for first-line supervisors. (Smeltzer, 1979,

3) Listening is the most important communication skill. (Carstens, 1979)

4) Effective listening is the most important communication skill necessary for entry level positions in various occupational contexts. (DiSalvo, 1980)

5) Listening skills are the most important communication skills for career competence. (Huchmore and Galvin, 1983)

6) Failure to listen was ranked as the second most critical problem that distinguishes ineffective from effective subordinates. (Downs and Conrad, 1982)

7) Ineffective listening leads to ineffective performance or low productivity. (Hunt and Cusella, 1983)

Effective listening is difficult for most people; it is much more difficult for an individual experiencing burnout. Professional problems, anxiety, and closed-mindedness have been identified as major factors that inhibit listening success. (Steil, p. 59; Wolvin, p. 106) Poor peer and group relationships, withdrawal from or irritability with co-workers, detachment from clients, diminished frustration tolerance, increasing rigidity, cynicism, apathy, emotional exhaustion, disorientation, moodiness, and physical problems compound listening problems for burnout victims.

Distortion of reality is often associated with job burnout. Effective listening is essential to reduce distortion of reality. One approach to increasing listening efficiency is the avoidance of bad listening habits. Do not decide in advance that the subject is uninteresting. Listen carefully before you evaluate. Do not criticize the communicator's manner of delivery. Try to understand the message no matter how poorly it is presented. Try to listen for the main ideas of the message rather than concentrating on the facts only. Do not allow yourself to fake attention to the speaker or allow your mind to wander during a discussion. Do not create distractions while listening or engage in premature evaluation. If you wish to evaluate, remember that your evaluation will be more meaningful if it is withheld until comprehension is as complete as possible.

Empathic listening is the key to comprehension. "In schools where listening is taught, listening comprehension has as much as doubled in a few months." (Steil, p. 6)

Avoid Blindering in Defining Problems

> "Definitions are limiting. Limitations are deadening. To limit oneself is a kind of suicide."
>
> (Robbins, p. 333)

Our perception of problems inevitably involves abstraction. We may, unconsciously, impose restrictions on solutions by our definition of the problem.

> One's definition (i.e., his interpretation, size up, perception, appraisal, and so on) of a problem greatly influences his attempts at solving the problem. But a definition is inevitably an abstraction, a leaving out of details. If, then, in defining a problem, one is unaware that he is leaving out details (especially if they are important or vital details), he is in danger of becoming blindered -- of unconsciously permitting his narrowed perception to restrict his attack on the problem. The basic correctives are (1) to remember that definitions inevitably involve the exclusion of details (perhaps crucial ones) and (2) to recognize

and remove one's blinders. (Haney, p. 473)

Distinguish Fact from Inference

"A brief written presentation that winnows fact from opinion is the basis for decision making around here." (Ed Harness former chairman, of Procter and Gamble cited in Peters, p. 151)

Dr. Bruce A. Baldwin, a practicing psychologist, reports that:

> The absence of this fundamental skill is the root of much emotional upset, worry and personal grief. Most of it is entirely unwarranted. With obvious tongue-in-cheek, Mark Twain once commented: "My life has been full of misfortunes. . .most of which never happened." In other words, do not waste your time and emotional energy worrying or getting upset about something that has not happened or that you do not know for a fact. Instead, trust in your ability to deal with problems as they arise. Avoid making assumptions, especially negative ones, about events. Do not jump to conclusions. When you do, you make the problem bigger, more emotionally threatening and overwhelming in proportion to your resources. By dealing only with facts, you respond to a practical problem that is known. As you learn this skill, you will find your confidence increasing and your "worry factor" on the wane. (Baldwin, p. 14)

Burnout victims are likely to have a distorted view of reality because they often act upon their inferences as if they were the facts of a situation. Assumptions about co-workers, the job, superiors' motives, reasons for people's behavior, etc., are treated as fact. Inferences involve mental leaps from the known to the unknown; as such, they must be viewed as less certain than direct observations.

ORGANIZATIONAL COPING METHODS

Institute Training Programs

Organizations can confront and combat job burnout through training programs. Each organization should compare its specific needs with the range of training programs and professional consultants available. Occupational burnout has many causes and many symptoms. (Farber, p. 246) The most effective approach is to tailor burnout training to the primary needs of the specific organization. Some training programs present individual coping methods without addressing group and organizational factors. Some social scientists emphasize social support methods (group) without adequate treatment of individual and organizational coping methods. Some training addresses only organizational coping and downplays, or omits, individual and group approaches. Some trainers approach burnout only from the narrow perspective of their professional specialty, i.e., relaxation therapy, biofeedback, management training, etc. These narrow approaches generally have limited impact in reducing job burnout.

Larger organizations may find it desirable to develop their own training programs for occupational burnout. (Edelwich and Brodsky offer excellent training guidelines in Paine, pp. 133-153.) Retain outside experts to provide specific resources but not to conduct the overall program. Organizational training should be structured by intensive study to answer the question: What kind(s) of burnout intervention should be offered by what kind(s) of individuals, aimed at what target(s), with what purpose(s), with what effects on the individual, work setting, and organization? (Farber, pp. 244-245)

It is crucial to avoid a one-shot approach to training. (Edelwich and Brodsky in Paine, p. 142) Follow up on results and institute additional training or refresher courses. Do not expect burnout to vanish following even a well-planned training program.

Increase Constructive Feedback

Employees often complain that their boss is too negative or never tells them what he feels. Spend part of each staff meeting or employee conference on positive feedback. Work hard to provide regular and sufficient constructive feedback on employee performance. Effective feedback reduces the anomie, feelings of hopelessness, and lack of of control that often cause job burnout. Pines has found in several studies that the amount of information regarding successes and performance level received by employees was "significantly and negatively correlated with burnout. . . . The more feedback received from supervisors and administrators, the less burnout." (Pines in Paine, p. 204)

Develop a systematic method within the organization to ensure that employees know that their contributions are appreciated. "People need information that supports their positive self-images, eases their concerns, and refuels them psychologically." (Levinson, p. 79) An article in the Harvard Business Review presents a serious indictment of many organizational efforts to provide feedback.

> Many compensation and performance appraisal programs actually contribute to people's sense that their efforts will be unrecognized, no matter how well they do. Organizational structures and processes that inhibit timely attacks on problems and delay competitive actions actually produce much of the stress that people experience at work. If top executives fail to see that organizational factors can cause burnout, their lack of understanding may perpetuate the problem. (Levinson, p. 79)

Many supervisors avoid feedback to (and from) employees as much as possible. They proudly assert to employees, "If you don't hear anything, you must be doing okay."

CONCLUSION

Burnout is debilitating to individuals and organizations. A burnout victim can utilize effective communication to rise from his/her own ashes, like the legendary phoenix, and return to a satisfying and productive career given sufficient group and organizational support.

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