

What Every Leader Ought To Know About Burnout And Its Impact On Innovation



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If you were feeling a little overwhelmed with work during the pandemic, fret not, you were not alone. People everywhere carved out socially distant routines that, for many, blurred the line between personal and professional life. Similarly, employers accepted the forced experiment to be flexible and trusted that business could still function as usual. Amidst all the turbulence, organisations had the chance to co-create better cultures with their employees. Those who chose to seize it took steps to elevate the employee experience. The progressive companies were quick to notice it and implement it on the ground. Nike, LinkedIn and Bumble started it off by giving their workers a paid week off. Citigroup banned work calls on Fridays. Scotland is working its way towards a four-day work week without a loss of pay. As organisations adopted a remote work arrangement, they started to see the effects of working from home through their employees. Regrettably, many other organisations didn't take the same steps. And to a certain extent, most companies are still struggling to face the conundrums that force them to question their current methods of working. The truth is, as much as it is tempting to yearn for pre-pandemic modes of thinking and working, these organisations have less to offer the candidates and their existing employees.

Why did employees experience burnout when they could work from home?

When you think of working from home, it is easy to imagine a cozy picture, almost like the laptop entrepreneur sipping his pina colada while sitting at the beach in Hawaii. Contrary to traditional thinking, where working from home equals slacking or doing the

bare minimum, working from home was pretty draining for many employees despite the conveniences that came with it. Yes, it meant more time with family members and even taking some time out to run errands, but it also meant that people had to work after working hours with expectations for them to respond to emails way past working hours. As countries issued lockdown orders and companies shifted to remote work setups, individuals went through chaos. The struggle from figuring out how to productively work from home, or worrying about being made redundant, to working longer hours; all these have significant impact on the employees. The sheer length of the pandemic, combined with the yo-yo effect of good and bad news are stressors that have caused employee burnout. Regardless if you are staying alone or living with family members, fully remote workers went through feelings of isolation and loneliness. Whether you found yourself spending more time with your devices, screaming at your kids at home, or missing the company of your friends and family, there were plenty of unique pandemic-related problems to go around. It has been a mad rollercoaster for many.

Burnout isn't just about feeling exhausted

While it may seem similar, burnout is not purely about feeling exhausted. We might think that burnout is the result of sitting at our desk for too long, attending too many Zoom meetings and never catching a break. That is not burnout, but just exhaustion! Exhaustion is just the first stage. Researchers¹ say that exhausted employees still believe in themselves and the work that they do. They are simply too tired to attend to it. Many of my friends have commented that they now work longer hours and feel the need to respond to emails late into the night. Moreover, a 24/7 organisational culture drains employees and gives them little opportunity to recharge. With such an overload evolving into a chronic job condition, it is no surprise that employees find themselves too depleted to even complete simple tasks. This is when they become cynical about themselves, their company and the workload they have. The prolonged sense of exhaustion leads employees to feel incompetent and stuck in their jobs. This hurts their morale and leads to the fear of not contributing meaningfully and feelings of inadequacy. The notion that the holidays should be the time to recharge is flawed! Holidays should be a time to celebrate. If work is exhausting people to the point that they are using their time off to recover, exhaustion is bound to transform into burnout in such working cultures. A healthy organisation does not drain people in the first place. Those struggling with inefficacy may have the energy and care for their job, but they do not feel validated by their contributions. This state of persistent fatigue arises when employees are buried with too much work to complete with limited resources and little control over their environment. This is the tipping point that turns exhaustion into burnout.

¹ Source of reference: Maslach C, Leiter MP. Understanding the burnout experience: recent research and its implications for psychiatry. World Psychiatry. 2016 Jun;15(2):103-11. doi: 10.1002/wps.20311. PMID: 27265691; PMCID: PMC4911781.



Image source: <https://www.achievers.com/blog/burnout-job/>

Feeling blah?

Adam Grant, organisational Psychologist and renowned author, put a name to the feeling we experienced that didn't fit the full description of burnout. He called it "languishing", after he found out from friends who struggled to concentrate on projects. It wasn't burnout as many had felt, and it wasn't depression either as many still held on to the feeling of hope. This middle ground feeling of being joyless and aimless is a sense of stagnation and emptiness, known as "languishing". This term was coined by sociologist Corey Keys, describing people who were 'not depressed' nor thriving either. The challenge with this feeling is that it can go unnoticed. It is difficult to catch yourself slipping slowly into solitude or notice the dulling of delight or the dwindling of your drive. As the pandemic continues to drag on, the state of anguish is morphing into a chronic condition of languish.

Before the pandemic, employees were habitually checking emails countless times a day and switching between tasks every few minutes. However, due to the pandemic, many employees now have to deal with interruptions from kids in the house, colleagues and bosses around the clock. Therefore, "not depressed" does not mean "not languishing".

"Not burned out" does not mean "fired up" either. There is an in-between space that leaders need to be aware of and be able to detect within themselves and their team members to lead them through the years ahead.



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Bad leadership makes burnout worse

Things head for a downturn when employees are not fully supported by their leader and the organisation. An overall work culture that promotes presenteeism will discourage employees from taking leave or utilizing the wellness initiatives that had been rolled out by the organisation. This defeats the purpose of creating such wellness initiatives in the first place. If stressors like discrimination, biasness or unfairness exist within the organisation, employees are bound to withdraw. The sad reality for many organisations is when employees shy away from speaking to their bosses about their personal struggles for fear of being seen as weak, or even worse; stigmatized. Research shows that 60% with a mental illness do not seek treatment because they worry about the impact it might have on their careers.

Stop sweeping mental health issues under the carpet

The situation is made worse if the leaders have an outdated mentality concerning speaking up about "personal issues at work". This is one of the fixed mindsets that need to be shifted to really showcase true leadership. If leaders are only concerned about the

work produced by their employees, but are not interested in listening to their "personal issues", then how are employees being treated humanely? Sweeping issues around mental health under the carpet will not make the issue surrounding burnout go away. Leaders cannot expect employees and colleagues to thrive professionally when they are struggling personally. A holistic approach to wellbeing demands that leaders be attentive to the needs of the whole person. This is an iceberg problem, where the main issue is hidden below the surface. The circumstances of working from home do not allow the leader to read non-verbal signs or detect red flags that may point to burnout within their team members. It is much harder for leaders to get a sense of how their employees are coping when everyone is working remotely. All of these issues are raising the focus on the leader to pick up the pieces and level up in the way they engage with their team members.



Image source: <https://reba.global/resource/how-to-break-down-barriers-to-better-employee-engagement-and-create-a-happier-workplace.html>

The wellbeing-engagement paradox

Research by Gallup's well-being engagement paradox of 2020 has shown that engagement and wellbeing are linked and known to be reciprocal. In other words, the higher the employee engagement, the better the wellbeing of the employee. It used to function in a directly proportional manner in the pre-pandemic days. When employees are engaged and thriving at work, burnout decreases and productivity increases. However, in 2020, employee engagement and wellbeing diverged and went their

separate ways. This divergence presents critical implications for the workplace leaders in the coming years. Many expected employee engagement to plunge as a result of hardships caused by the pandemic. Yet, in contrast to wellbeing, employee engagement increased overall in 2020. Despite experiencing new kinds of stress and worry each day, many employees have been steadfast through COVID-19 and they showcased their efforts, enthusiasm and commitment during this period. During the layoffs and furloughs, employees were grateful to have a job, and experience the benefits of increased flexibility and autonomy from working from home. They appreciated the leadership management who put in efforts to rally the employees and engage them to stay afloat. Employees during this initial phase were inspired by and united by a shared sense of purpose.

Since engagement levels were notably high, it is easy to expect wellness scores to be high as well since that has been the way engagement influenced wellness during the pre-pandemic days. Unfortunately, that has not been the case because remote working resulted in intensified engagement as well as negative emotions such as stress, worry and fear. Many employees were forced home with little to no warning while still actively working to reduce stress and worry. Many went through social isolation and restriction due to the restrictions imposed by the government authorities. The fact that many employees had no idea how to structure their remote effectively and had little guidance on that matter only worsened their feelings of stress and panic. Moreover, there is a big difference between being trapped at home in contrast to having the flexibility to choose to work from home.

The extreme polarising work-life experiences that resulted from the pandemic left many employees hitting or approaching a breaking point that leads to burnout and suffering with long term consequences. Negative emotions like stress and worry spiked in the early months of the pandemic and drained the fortitude of the employees.



Here is an important insight for leaders: When managing remote teams, leaders need to capitalise on the advantages of working from home, while actively working to reduce sources of stress and worry of their employees. It is important for leaders to

engage their employees in a bid to fend off chronically high levels of stress and worry. Leaders who work proactively to prevent and manage burnout while capitalising on the needed flexibility and efficiency that comes with remote working will be able to develop stronger, healthier and more productive workforces for the future. Leaders have to keep



in mind that even as the economy recovers, it will not be a **sustainable** recovery unless a holistic approach is used to ensure the wellbeing of its people.

Challenges you will face as a leader

Whether your employees are returning to the office, staying remote for the long-term, or have worked in the office throughout the pandemic, employee experiences have changed. Which of those experiences should stay, and which should continue to evolve? How can you as a leader create peak and other positive experiences that meet your team's needs whether they're physically in the office or elsewhere? More importantly, how do you ensure your team retains its productivity or even exceeds it without compromising on wellbeing? What can you do to help a struggling team member with mental health issues get through a difficult time? How do you ensure your employees are empowered to innovate and make an impact?

Think about it

- Do you currently have a psychological circle of safety in your team where people can open up to you as a leader?
- How comfortable are your team members in opening up to you and admitting their mental health is taking a toll? Ask them on a scale of 1-10 and probe further based on their answers to get clear answers.
- How do you identify team members who are exhausted, languished or burnt out when they are working remotely?
- How can you ensure that you are not contributing to burnout? What can you start, stop, or continue to do?
- How are you helping your team to relax, recuperate and rejuvenate?
- How do you develop an environment that fosters innovation and impact?
- How will you keep the morale up for your team when individuals start leaving?

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About the Author

Vivek Iyyani is a globally recognized leadership expert and keynote speaker helping organisations and leaders work better together in the new normal. Vivek has spoken, worldwide, to organisations and enterprises from Fortune 500 companies to associations and government institutions. He is the founder and CEO of Millennial Minds - a company that has helped leaders and teams leverage twenty-first-century collaboration skills globally. He has been invited to many international media outlets to share his opinions as a thought leader on the millennial generation. Some of his recent features include Channel NewsAsia, Money FM, Straits Times, SME Entrepreneur Magazine, CEO Magazine, and National Integration Council (Singapore Prime Minister's Office). He has authored two other books entitled "Empowering Millennials" and "Engaging Millennials". Learn more at <https://www.vivekiyyani.com> and follow him at @vivekiyyani on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter. His latest book, Millennial Leaders: Working Across Generations In The New Normal, will be out in all major bookstores in December 2022.