An Organizational Approach to Healing Burnout

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, THE BUSINESS AND administrative services division of a large nonprofit institution was facing serious troubles. Its talented workforce had become demoralized and burned-out, and no wonder. The organization's management corps was minimally trained. Its far-flung departments had trouble communicating with each other. Its 17 departments had become 17 silos, rarely collaborating. There were almost as many organizational strategies as there were staff members. And to top it all off, the organization lacked important resources.

The division's management decided to use our organizational checkup survey to measure burnout across the six areas. All employees were given the opportunity to fill out this probing questionnaire, which was locally retitled the "Let's Hear It! Survey." Ninety percent of the 1,100 staff replied with gusto, adding reams of free-form comments.

Administering the survey, we observed many telling moments. In a particularly troubled wing of the organization, six supervisors refused to take the survey as long as their common manager was in the room. About 70 staff took the survey in one of five languages other than English. (Oral translation was provided in Spanish, Cantonese, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Tagalog.) These staff members, for whom English was a second (or third) language, showed remarkable enthusiasm for the survey – the first time ever that they had been invited to communicate in the workplace in their native language.

The survey results showed that the biggest problem areas were fairness and values. For instance, the staff felt that favoritism guided promotions, and that a special bonus program was not actually based on merit. Employees from every frontline unit were formed into committees, charged with examining the survey results for their unit and with developing initiatives for change. One committee, for example, worked to develop a distinguished service award that would be judged as a fair way to reward people who had made exceptional contributions to the organization's goals. A year later, a second survey showed that these changes had led to successful improvements in all six areas, but especially the targeted ones of fairness and values.

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down in the details of organizing volunteers and coordinating actions that he loses sight of the larger goal of environmental preservation. His work no longer feels meaningful to him.

Mark also feels a lot of dissatisfaction in the area of rewards. No one goes into the nonprofit sector to get rich, but Mark expected to enjoy his activist activities more. He also expected more appreciation and praise from his colleagues and from the communities he serves.

In contrast, Susan's core problem is in the area of community.[7] In her work setting, she is excluded from her colleagues' circle of support, and she spends a lot of time feeling isolated and lonely. Being left out of the loop introduces a second mismatch for Susan, this time in the area of control. By the time an issue appears on a meeting's formal agenda, the matter has already been settled in the informal conversations in which Susan could not participate. As a result, Susan does not feel that she has an adequate say in how she does her work.

As time wears on, Susan has begun to suspect that her lack of community and control at work are due to a third area of mismatch: fairness. She wonders whether the male doctors in the ER are discriminating against her because she is a woman. Because of this hint of injustice, Susan feels not only anxious and uncertain about how best to do her job, but also angry and hostile toward her colleagues.

Two Paths to Engagement

There are two paths to banishing burnout: the individual path, and the organizational path. Both Mark and Susan took individual approaches; they first identified the mismatches leading to their burnout, and then enlisted their colleagues and organizations in addressing those mismatches.[8]

An organizational approach, in contrast, starts with management first identifying mismatches that are commonly shared, and then connecting with individuals to narrow these person-organization gaps.[9] The sidebar (left) describes how this organizational approach was used in a large organization. This strategy of working collaboratively on shared problems can be used in organizations of any size, even those nonprofits that are small and that have limited resources.

No matter the path to engagement, it is important to keep in mind that positive changes don't just happen. Instead, people must take action, and well-informed action, at that. Rather than assumptions and "best guesses" about what the problem is, the six-area diagnostic tool can help pinpoint it more accurately. Solutions that don't address the problem can be worse than no solutions at all.

For example, we recall attending a meeting of teachers for which the school superintendent had hired a motivational speaker to inspire them and help them deal with stress. As the speaker reeled off stories from his own days as an athletic coach, we watched the teachers sitting silently, their venom