



Employee Burnout:

How SP Leaders Can Manage It Most Effectively

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define “burnout” and its impact on personal health and well-being
2. Identify causes of employee burnout
3. Examine and adopt tactics to alleviate burnout and employee frustration

Rocket launches are exciting. The rocket ignites, and the booster rocket engines strain to push the heavy load into the sky toward outer space. The rocket climbs higher and higher, propelled by the booster rocket engines. Soon, the booster rocket engines exhaust their fuel. No longer useful, with no energy left to propel the rocket, the booster rocket engines detach as the shuttle continues its journey until it reaches outer space. NASA calls this scenario “burnout.”

At times, Sterile Processing (SP) professionals may relate to those booster rocket engines. They may strain against ever-growing workloads and customer demands, staffing shortages and a discipline that has become increasingly complex with each new medical device and innovative procedure. If SP managers don’t strive to keep their employees’ well-being as a primary focus, their teams may succumb to excess stress and burnout. SP managers must identify and act upon signs of burnout before it negatively affects the entire department and its customers.

Objective 1: Define “burnout” and its impact on personal health and well-being

Merriam Webster defines burnout as “exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration.” The human body can only function well when it receives proper care, which includes good nutrition, exercise and mental wellness. Employees experiencing burnout may suffer from depression, anxiety, fatigue, high blood pressure, heart disease, weight fluctuation and substance abuse.¹ The World Health Organization (WHO), in its 11th Revision of the International Classification of Disease (ICD), recognizes burnout as an occupational phenomenon.²

Burnout is costly to healthcare systems, not only in actual healthcare costs but also in loss of days worked. Stanford researchers found that burnout costs healthcare systems \$190 billion annually and causes almost 120,000 deaths each year. Annually, 550 million lost workdays are attributed to employee call-offs due to burnout, costing approximately \$500 billion.²



Burnout should not be confused with stress. Stress is a normal experience and can arise from numerous situations, such as increasing job expectations, walking down a dark alley at night or driving in rush-hour traffic. It can also be triggered by happy events, like expecting a child or getting married. Stress is the body's reaction to prepare it for a challenge (often called the "fight or flight" response). Stress may contribute to burnout, but it is not burnout itself.

Burnout manifests differently, depending on the person and situation. The first form of burnout, "neglect burnout," manifests when an employee feels helpless at work and is not performing as well as they believe they should. They may feel incompetent, unworthy of their position or job title, and doubt their ability to perform the job correctly.

The second type, "under-challenged burnout," occurs when an employee feels underappreciated or has become bored with their job role. Someone experiencing under-challenged burnout may become cynical and withdraw from their responsibilities.

The third type, "overload burnout," is common in Sterile Processing departments (SPDs) and may even, at times, be encouraged by managers. With overload burnout, an employee goes above and beyond, prioritizing work activities over all others, while neglecting their own health, family life and well-being. With increasing workloads and staff shortages, SP managers may be inclined to encourage and reward this type of work overload, even though it can negatively affect the employee, department and facility.

Objective 2: Identify causes of employee burnout

Burnout develops over time and is often overlooked by the employee experiencing it. Supervisors and managers should watch for signs and symptoms of employee burnout. Although there are many types of burnout, the symptoms are often similar and may include:

Change in demeanor or attitude—

A prolonged shift in demeanor, attitude or behavior is a symptom of burnout. An employee may become more withdrawn, irritable or cynical about their job. They may avoid specific situations or co-workers or disengage from departmental activities or colleagues with whom they were once close. This is similar to "quiet quitting," where employees distance themselves and only do the bare minimum to keep their jobs.

Exhaustion—An employee may show signs of physical or mental exhaustion. Do they look or act tired? Physical exhaustion can be expressed as frequent headaches, sore muscles or muscle weakness. Mental exhaustion may present as depression, anger, irritability or even a sense of dread.

Increased absenteeism—Calling off work is a normal occurrence. People get sick, cars break down, and family obligations lead to challenges that contribute to work absences. When call-offs are frequent with no underlying obligations or obvious contributing reasons, however, it could be a sign of burnout. Increased absenteeism can occur when employees disengage, resent or dread going to work, or are simply bored.

Increased mistakes and forgetfulness—

Those who are disillusioned with their job often do not pay attention to details. Forgetfulness is a function of having too many things to do or not caring enough. Even when putting work before all else, increasing pressure to achieve more can lead to mistakes. Staff members who have increasing error rates and are missing important meetings or deadlines may be suffering from burnout.

Illness and depression—When burnout progresses, it can lead to physical illness and depression. Burnout shares symptoms with a large variety of events that can happen in a person's life. A loved one's illness, the addition of a new family member, or a child going off to college are all examples that can cause employees to demonstrate symptoms of burnout. True burnout is chronic. The symptoms start small and grow over time; it is not a sudden change in behavior.

In 2018, Gallup polled more than 7,500 full-time employees in the U.S. about why they felt burned out. It may come as a surprise that four of the top five reasons for burnout had less to do with demanding work and more to do with how the workplace was managed.³ The top five reasons cited were:

1. Unfair treatment at work

This can encompass bullying, bias, favoritism, policies, compensation and a lack of trust in supervisors. Employees who experience these behaviors are 2.3 times more likely to experience burnout.³ Institutionalized unfair treatment disillusiones employees, creating distrust and cynicism.



2. Unmanageable workload

Walking into a department filled with racks full of instruments that require assembly, wrapping and sterilization, or entering the decontamination room with seven orthopedic case carts waiting to be broken down and cleaned can be overwhelming. Occasional intense workloads are not necessarily harmful, but when heavy demands become the norm, it can become devastating to employee morale. Most employees want to succeed; therefore, failing to meet workload expectations, even if they are unreasonable, can lead to burnout, especially when management is unresponsive to employees' needs and concerns.

It is not just the work itself causing the problems, either. Currently, many healthcare organizations are experiencing employee shortages, and this is true for many SPDs. Continually hiring inexperienced staff members can be challenging for preceptors because they must educate and mentor while doing their own work. More experienced employees often become the go-to staff who are asked to do more by working extra shifts, working in an area that others prefer not to, or being the resource for those outside the department. Add to this a lack of acknowledgement and appreciation from leadership, and it can become a recipe for burnout.

3. Lack of role clarity

SP employees should be able to switch gears easily. This is necessary because the department must remain flexible to meet customer and patient needs. When employees are unclear about their roles, however, productivity can drop. Working in ambiguity can lead to increased stress and burnout.

4. Lack of communication and support from the manager

Not knowing what to expect or how management might react to certain workplace situations can make it difficult for employees to perform well. Employees who feel that management will blame them and not support them when things go wrong are more likely to experience burnout.

5. Unreasonable time pressures

When employees receive unrealistic deadlines or constantly feel rushed to complete their various tasks, they may experience burnout. Employees may also fall behind on other tasks they need to perform, leading to more stress. A work environment perpetually short on time becomes ripe for employee burnout.

Objective 3: Examine and adopt tactics to alleviate burnout and employee frustration

Doing yoga or practicing meditation may help employees alleviate stress, but these types of activities are not a solution for burnout. Burnout can only be alleviated if the source that caused it is addressed. Leaders should perform an assessment to identify unhealthy practices in their department. Even with resolution of other burnout factors, a dysfunctional work environment will cause employee burnout.

Managers need to be visible in their departments and actively work toward a better functioning workplace. According to the Gallup survey, employees who felt supported by their manager experienced 70% less burnout.³ Some of the best managers are ones who prioritize their employees, spend more time in their departments, and work side by side with employees to help cover extremely busy shifts. When managers make more

time for their departments and teams and aren't solely focused on meetings, employees will notice and appreciate the effort.

Listening to work-related challenges gives employees confidence that their concerns are being taken seriously. Managers who consistently provide feedback and check in with employees are viewed favorably. It is important that SP leaders invest time to get to know employees, celebrate their successes and understand their challenges. Managers should also encourage and build teamwork in the SPD. When an employee is having a difficult day, for example, co-workers can help and encourage them. Building a cohesive team can support mental health, increase productivity, and create an environment where employees enjoy coming to work. Leaders who remain focused on the needs and challenges of their employees are also better able to determine when more staff members should be hired and processes require streamlining.

Managers also have the power to change the employee workload and that does not always translate to hiring more people. Listening to employees is essential. Leaders should identify workload bottlenecks and pressures to rush processes. Investigating and resolving the root causes of time constraints can help eliminate the stress that leads to burnout. Something as simple as automating a previously manual task can significantly decrease workload—and the probability of burnout along with it.


With the fast pace, time pressures and extensive demands of healthcare settings, it is no surprise that the industry experiences some of the highest burnout rates of any profession. Given this, it is particularly important



to not lose sight of why the SPD is here. Do SP employees know they make a difference in patients' lives? Do they understand why processes can never be rushed and how missteps can contribute to infections and other negative patient outcomes? While employees may not have direct patient contact, the instruments they clean, assemble and sterilize do. Giving employees a sense of purpose that correlates to the department's mission and values helps instill a feeling of pride and inclusion that benefits SP professionals and their teammates, customers, patients and organizations.

Conclusion

Burnout is common in the workplace, but it is also manageable. Managers should communicate about burnout with their employees, actively work to

address burnout in those experiencing it, and promote methods to bring positive change for every employee to ensure they do not feel neglected, underchallenged, overloaded or unsupported. 

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