Shift Your Culture or Risk Employee Burn Out

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As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to impact the way organizations do business, recent reports show employee burnout is on the rise. In a poll of U.S. workers, more than half reported feeling the symptoms of burnout, and when you consider the condition's top causes — lack of work/life balance, isolation, unmanageable workload — the increase isn't surprising.

And it comes at a high cost. One survey noted that "95 percent of human resource leaders admit employee burnout is sabotaging workforce retention" and another reported workplace stress caused between $125 million and $190 billion in additional healthcare spending annually. And that was before the pandemic.

It is essential that companies adapt to reflect the unique needs of a workforce navigating the challenges brought on by

Covid-19 and create cultures which value the whole individual, not simply the sum of their efforts. Below are ways to make culture shifts that retain your employees.

Sustainable workloads.

Workload is often one of the top reasons employees cite when feeling burned out. Despite some reports showing that productivity went up as teams transitioned into fully-remote work, leaders must not take it as an clear invitation to increase workloads. For many, throwing themselves into work was one way to cope with the vast unknowns which have characterized this year, and productivity levels may dip simply because they've been firing so hot for so long.

It's also important to consider competing challenges employees may be facing, such as childcare or Zoom fatigue, and assign tasks and the complexity of the workload based on your assessment and each employee's abilities.

Performance expectations.

High levels of stress due to performance expectations can often be solved by analyzing your teams in the current context. The abrupt shift to virtual teamwork created a lot of strain for individuals, and the pressures on teams will continue as companies shift their focus to how, if, and when to bring employees back to the office.

Evaluate the makeup and status of your organization's teams, giving consideration to both tasks and people. Are their objectives still relevant and are their timelines appropriate? Are you spreading certain individuals too thin by placing them on unnecessary teams? Or are there teams who need more resources to work more effectively? Approaching performance with curiosity can help organizations better identify problems and ease the pressure to perform.

Additionally, giving employees clear priorities can help them focus on what's most important and balance their responsibilities. Ensure your teams have a solid understanding of goals or deadlines they're expected to hit and feel empowered to weigh in on those expectations.

The number one problem shared among entrepreneurs today is finding, vetting, hiring, and retaining expertise.

Work-life balance.

With the boundaries between work and home becoming blurred, cultivating a culture that prioritizes rest is critical. Rest goes hand in hand with innovation, creativity and results, however, the pandemic has made traditional travel fraught with challenges, if not impossible. Most employees are working with no vacation in sight and forget they can still use their paid time off, even if there's nowhere to go. Remind them of the importance of taking a break.

It's also important to adapt your notion of what constitutes a workday. For some, traditional work hours may still fit with a working-from-home landscape, while for others, a less-traditional schedule may do wonders for their wellbeing. Create ways for your teams to reflect on when they work best and adapt their workflow. Are they most inspired in the evenings after the kids are in bed? Do they need a couple hours between meetings to give themselves time to recharge? Be open to new timelines and structures, and lead by example.

Additionally, the increased reliance on virtual communications and home offices means that for many, it is more difficult to unplug and turn work off. Ask employees what rest looks like for them in this new landscape. Is it having a day of no meetings? Having cutoff times for phone calls? These small steps can be crucial in ensuring that your teams have the time and space they need to recharge.

Communication, feedback, and support.

Creating a culture of trust, transparency and openness is critical to reducing the stresses felt by today's workforce. This year has been filled with uncertainties, so being open with your teams about the organization's return-to-work plans, pivots in structure or projections can help give them a sense of control when it comes to childcare planning, personal financial decisions, and how they prioritize their tasks. With clear, regular updates from leadership, organizations can boost morale and increase employee engagement, as well as help their teams feel empowered to make well-informed decisions for themselves and their families.

The American Psychological Association's Center for Organizational Excellence outlined the importance of communicating to prevent burnout, recommending "regular, ongoing opportunities to provide feedback to management." Doing this allows leaders to recognize when it may be time to dial demands back and expand resources, such as child-care assistance and increased wellness and mental health support.

Connection and engagement.

One of the toughest challenges currently facing companies is how to help mitigate their employees' feelings of isolation. Feeling disconnected can compound stresses due to workload and performance, and with many organizations still fully remote, leaders must find new ways of inspiring authentic connection. Virtual coworking is a good place to begin, but finding ways to allow for connection not related to workload is key. For some organizations, hosting virtual happy hours, trivia nights and even karaoke parties have been innovative ways they've created a culture of online fun. Slack can also be used for more than productivity — consider starting a channel that

invites people to share birthdays, posts pictures of pets and funny WFH moments, and of course, share memes.

Nothing can happen without organizations first acknowledging the circumstances. By choosing to not proceed with business as usual, leaders can generate responsive strategies with the capacity to increase employee satisfaction and retention, and improve performance.

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