When Work Becomes a State of Depletion

Employee Burnout and What Leaders Can Change

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The workplace examples in this book are fictional. This guide provides general U.S. workplace education. Federal, state and local protections may overlap. For a specific employment decision, review the facts and applicable requirements with qualified counsel or your designated HR or compliance adviser.

Introduction

When the Weekend Stops Being Enough

It's Sunday evening, and Maya has already opened Monday's schedule. Two coworkers are out. A client escalation is sitting in her inbox. She's supposed to train a new employee tomorrow, somewhere between the meetings she agreed to cover when a position went vacant. She sets her phone down, then picks it back up to see whether anyone else has replied.

By Wednesday, she will probably have found a way to get most of it done. That's part of what makes her situation hard to see. From her manager's side of the desk, the urgent work still moves. From Maya's side, everything takes a little more out of her than it used to. She misses the days when she could answer a question without first having to pull her attention away from five other things.

I wanted to write about what happens in that space between the work getting done and the person doing it running out of room. In employee relations, a missed deadline or an absence can arrive on your desk as a single event. To make a sound decision, you have to look back far enough to see the conditions surrounding it. Who was assigned the work? What changed? What had the employee already raised? What did leadership do with that information?

I use *a state of depletion* to describe the experience of chronic workplace strain becoming the backdrop to the workday. The World Health Organization describes burnout as an occupational phenomenon associated with chronic workplace stress that has gone unmanaged. It classifies burnout separately from medical conditions. That distinction matters in a book that also addresses disability, leave and confidentiality. [1]

This book is for the manager who sees something changing and wants to start a useful conversation. It's for the HR professional who has to make sure the right process happens while the work keeps moving. And it's for the employee who has been telling themselves to make it through one more week.

CHAPTER 1

How Burnout Changes the Way Work Feels

A demanding week can end with a clear finish line. The deadline passes, coverage returns, and the employee gets to spend a day working at a normal pace. With chronic strain, the finish line keeps moving. The extra duties carry into the next week. The job that was supposed to become manageable after the hiring freeze becomes the job as it is now.

The WHO identifies three dimensions of burnout. There is exhaustion, a growing distance from the job or cynicism about it, and a decline in the person's sense of effectiveness at work. These dimensions help explain why burnout can feel like a change in the way you show up for the entire day. They belong to a workplace framework, and a manager should use them to guide questions about the job and its conditions. [1]

What you might hear

"I reread the same email four times before I could answer it." "I used to have ideas for improving this process. These days I'm trying to keep up with it." "By the time I close out the urgent cases, I've missed the part of the day when I do my best thinking." Each of these statements gives a manager somewhere to start. Ask what has changed, which tasks require uninterrupted time, and how frequently urgent work displaces planned work.

What you might miss

An employee can sound composed in meetings and still spend the rest of the day catching up. Another person might seem withdrawn because the role changed, a conflict is unresolved, or personal circumstances are affecting their attention. Changes in behavior have many possible explanations. If someone describes a health concern, give them a private route to HR and, when appropriate, encourage them to seek guidance from a qualified healthcare professional. Your conversation can stay focused on the work and the support they are requesting.

If you recognize yourself in these pages, think about the last week you remember feeling able to do your work at a sustainable pace. What was different about the volume, the schedule, or the support available to you? You can bring that comparison into a conversation without first having to settle on a label.

CHAPTER 2

Where the Workload Went

When a job becomes vacant, the work goes somewhere. Some tasks are suspended. Others are formally reassigned. Then there is the work that finds its own destination. A supervisor forwards the difficult calls to the person who handles them well. New employees ask that same person for help. By the time someone revisits the vacancy, a full set of responsibilities can have been distributed through dozens of small decisions that nobody recorded.

Maya's manager sees a strong employee helping where she can. Maya sees two calendars. One is full of scheduled work. The other holds the calls, training questions and escalations she has to fit into whatever time is left. If leadership measures her against the first calendar alone, the assessment misses much of what she spends the week doing.

Make invisible work visible

Look at a representative week with the employee or team. Compare scheduled hours with the work actually performed. Ask who covers absences, trains new staff, handles interruptions, and resolves cases that take longer than the standard estimate. Include the time people spend coordinating the work. On teams that handle distressing calls or confrontational situations, ask how often the same people are assigned those cases and what support they have after a difficult interaction.

Workload is only part of the review. A manageable assignment can become exhausting when three people can change the deadline, the employee lacks the authority to make routine decisions, or a manager responds to bad news by blaming whoever brought it forward. Ask employees where they lose time waiting for a decision and what happens when they report that they are at capacity. The U.S. Surgeon General's workplace well-being framework places worker voice and equity at the center of this work. [2]

Turn the list into a decision

Suppose Maya has ten hours of training work and four hours of escalations in a typical week, on top of a nearly full calendar. Her manager can move two training sessions to the team lead, rotate escalations, or renegotiate a deadline. Ask the leader with authority to make a choice and say what comes off the calendar. Otherwise, the plan can amount to asking Maya to find the same fourteen hours again.

CHAPTER 3

The First Conversation

A manager sees two reports arrive late and hears an employee say, “I’m running on empty.” Set aside a private meeting. Be specific about what you observed and give the employee enough room to describe their side of it.

> “The last two Friday reports came in on Monday, and you mentioned that the last few weeks have been difficult. I’d like to understand what’s getting in the way. Can we look at what you’re carrying and what needs my help?”

Then let the employee answer. When the employee describes competing assignments, pull up the deadlines and decide which one moves. If they say a health issue is affecting the work or ask for a change or time away for a medical reason, connect them promptly with the appropriate HR or leave contact.

> “Thank you for telling me. We can keep this conversation focused on what would help you at work. I’ll connect you with HR so you have a private way to discuss your options. We can also review this week’s priorities now.”

Document decisions and follow through

A short management note might read, “We reviewed the dates of the two reports and the assignments due during the same period. I moved training coverage to Jordan through Friday and agreed to confirm the next report deadline tomorrow. We’ll meet again next Tuesday.” Keep the work note factual and distinguish what the employee reported from what you verified. Use the designated confidential process for any medical information. [3, 4]

A check-in works best when the employee can see what happened after they spoke. At the follow-up, ask whether the agreed change actually freed time. The calendar might show that the training transferred, while the questions still come to the original trainer. If that happens, clarify who owns the questions and let the new trainer know what authority comes with the role.

When a different concern surfaces

If someone reports harassment, discrimination, unpaid work, or a safety issue, route it through the applicable reporting and review process. A workload adjustment can help the employee today while the organization separately examines what they reported. If the same manager is named in the concern, use another designated reporting channel and keep the employee informed about the next step you can share.

CHAPTER 4

Workplace Burnout and Employment Law

When someone says, “I’m burned out,” a workload conversation may be the right first response. More details can change what the employer needs to do. “My provider says I need time off for treatment,” or “Because of a health condition, I need to start later for the next month,” should reach the designated HR or leave contact promptly. Employees can request support in ordinary language. [3, 5, 6]

Disability accommodation under the ADA

For covered employers, a qualified employee with a disability may be entitled to a reasonable accommodation absent undue hardship. A request can be made in plain language by describing a needed workplace change for a medical reason. HR can work with the employee to identify job-related limitations, essential functions and effective options. Depending on the facts, options might include a schedule adjustment, a quiet workspace, changes in how assignments are communicated, or a period of leave. When the disability or need is unclear, HR may seek reasonable supporting documentation within ADA limits. [3, 4, 9]

Protected leave under the FMLA

For an eligible employee of a covered employer, a mental health condition can qualify as a serious health condition if it meets the applicable inpatient-care or continuing-treatment criteria. The employer generally must provide the eligibility notice within five business days after a request for FMLA leave or learning that leave may be for an FMLA-qualifying reason, absent extenuating circumstances. HR should assess eligibility, provide required notices, and handle certification and designation as applicable. A certification can support the need for leave without including a diagnosis. Check applicable state or local leave protections and employer policies as part of the review. [5, 6]

Privacy and job-related inquiries

Send medical information through restricted HR channels and keep it separate from regular personnel records, subject to applicable confidentiality rules. Share work restrictions or implementation details with managers as needed. Direct any proposed medical inquiry or fitness-for-duty examination to HR or counsel. For current employees, ADA rules generally require disability-related inquiries or medical exams to be job-related and consistent with business necessity, subject to applicable exceptions. [4, 5]

An employee may need leave for treatment and a schedule adjustment on return. Evaluate each applicable process and assign someone to coordinate the handoff.

CHAPTER 5

Attendance Performance and the Risk of Retaliation

A manager wants to issue an attendance warning because an employee missed a client meeting. The employee says the absence was connected to treatment. Before deciding how to code the absence or whether to proceed with corrective action, HR should establish what the employee communicated, when the employer learned it, which protections may apply, and whether other incidents in the proposed warning are protected. FMLA-protected absences must be excluded from attendance points and other adverse treatment. [5, 6]

A performance conversation can still be appropriate when the facts support it. Use objective expectations, verified examples and consistent standards. For a deadline issue, check when the assignment was made, whether priorities shifted, and who had authority to extend the deadline. If an accommodation request arises during the conversation, start the applicable review and have HR evaluate the timing and basis for any proposed action. For an attendance or conduct decision, a vague description such as “seems disengaged” adds little. A dated record of what occurred gives HR something it can evaluate. [3, 9]

The after-hours email

A nonexempt employee answers client emails each night and tells a manager she’s exhausted. The manager says the time was unauthorized. Under the FLSA, work the employer suffers or permits is compensable. When an employer knows or has reason to believe work is being performed, payroll should review the hours and any overtime owed. Provide a reasonable way to report unscheduled work and make sure managers refrain from discouraging accurate reporting. Address after-hours expectations separately from paying for hours worked. [7, 11]

The group workload complaint

Three employees ask a coworker to bring their staffing concerns to management. The National Labor Relations Act can protect covered employees who act together about working conditions, including in nonunion workplaces. In some circumstances one employee bringing a group concern can also be protected. Before considering discipline, identify whether the activity may be protected and consult the appropriate adviser. Check applicable anti-retaliation protections when employees request accommodation or protected leave, report unpaid hours, or raise concerns about discrimination. [3, 5, 8, 12]

Someone still needs to answer the staffing question. Give the group a response date, explain what leadership is reviewing, and bring the answer back to the people who raised it.

CHAPTER 6

Redesigning the Work

One of the quickest ways to lose trust is to acknowledge overload on Tuesday and assign three new priorities on Wednesday without moving anything else. If you lead the team, write down what should get done first and who decides when two assignments compete. When you add work, identify what can wait, who can take it, or what additional coverage will make it possible.

Test changes against a real week

Start with a single pressure point. If unplanned client calls repeatedly interrupt work that requires concentration, rotate escalation coverage and give the person on rotation a lighter scheduled workload. If an entire team works late to produce a weekly report few people use, ask the decision-maker whether a shorter report or a less frequent schedule would serve the same purpose. If a staffing gap is driving overtime, calculate coverage using the work the team actually does, including training, breaks and handoffs.

Set communication expectations by role and shift. Specify what warrants after-hours contact, who is on call and where employees record time worked. If the team can keep a regular handoff, put the responsibility in the schedule. A policy about unplugging is easier to follow when an employee knows who is responsible after they sign off. Review the pay implications of after-hours work with payroll. [7]

Find out where the work moved

A change that gives one employee relief can create an overload somewhere else. When training is reassigned, check the new trainer's workload. When the team reduces overtime, check whether demand fell, work was delayed, or employees continued after hours without recording time. Use employee feedback alongside staffing, schedule and workload data. Choose team-level indicators and keep personal medical information out of the review.

The Surgeon General's workplace framework and NIOSH's healthcare well-being guide both give leaders ways to examine the conditions people work under. An employee assistance program can offer individual support. In the same week, leadership can adjust the schedule, change an approval process, or shift work to a role with the capacity and authority to handle it. [2, 10]

CHAPTER 7

What Employees Can Say and Ask For

When you are tired, explaining your entire work history can feel like one more assignment. Start with one recent example and a decision someone can make. A manager who hears “I can’t keep doing this” may understand the urgency. Giving them a concrete choice makes the next step easier to agree on and easier to check.

> “I’m covering the intake queue and training a new employee this week. Both need time on Thursday, when the client report is due. Can we move the report to Friday or assign queue coverage to someone else from ten to noon?”

If the problem has been going on for weeks, say how long and describe the impact. “Since the vacancy opened six weeks ago, I’ve handled the closing queue three nights most weeks. I’m working past my scheduled end time. Can we review coverage and confirm how I should record the extra time?” A dated summary of what you raised and what was agreed can help you prepare for a follow-up. Keep your notes free of other people’s confidential information.

When the request is health related

If you want a workplace change or time away because of a health condition, use the designated HR or leave channel. For example, “A health condition is affecting my ability to work my current schedule. I’d like to discuss a temporary adjustment and learn how to request it.” Or, “I need time away for treatment and would like to speak with the person who handles leave.” You can ask what information is needed, who receives it, and when to expect the next step. [3, 5, 6]

When you have raised it before

Ask for a decision by a specific time. “We spoke last Tuesday about the volume of weekend calls. Could we confirm by Friday who will cover the escalation line and which items can wait until Monday?” If the concern involves discrimination, safety, unpaid hours or another protected issue, use the applicable reporting channel. If the strain is affecting your health, consider speaking with a qualified healthcare professional about what you’re experiencing and what support may be appropriate.

CHAPTER 8

A Thirty Day Plan for Leaders and HR

A thirty-day review gives a team time to investigate a recurring problem and try a manageable change. Respond promptly to individual requests for leave or accommodation and to concerns about pay, safety, or misconduct as they arise. Those processes can run alongside the team review.

Days one through five Identify the pressure point

Choose a team with a recurring workload or coverage problem. Name a leader who can make a staffing or priority decision and an HR partner who can receive sensitive concerns privately. Review recent schedules, recorded overtime, backlogs and missed handoffs. Ask employees which duties get pushed to the end of the day and what happens to those duties when someone takes leave. Establish a baseline for two measures that fit the problem.

Days six through ten Decide what will change

Pick one source of friction. Name the duty or expectation you're changing, the person who owns the change, and the date it starts. Tell the team which assignments can wait and how to escalate competing priorities. Make the change available across the affected shifts. A process that works for the weekday team may leave weekend staff with the same coverage problem.

Days eleven through twenty Check how the plan works

Speak with people doing the work, including those receiving reassigned duties. Compare the schedule with the hours actually worked. If overtime declines while late work is still happening, involve payroll and address reporting. If deadlines improve at the expense of another team's backlog, revisit the assignment with both teams. [7]

Days twenty-one through thirty Decide what to keep

Review the measures and employee feedback with the person who can commit resources. A service team could compare recorded weekly overtime and overdue cases, then ask who is handling the escalation line during absences. Share what changed, what the team learned, and the date for the next review. If the decision requires budget approval, say who has it and when they will respond.

A useful thirty-day outcome can be modest. The coverage rotation is working, employees know how to report hours, and Monday's escalations finally have an owner. That is a specific improvement the team can keep testing.

CHAPTER 9

Tools for the Next Conversation

Workload review

Bring the schedule and two examples of work that spilled beyond it. Use the space below to record decisions during the conversation.

Assigned work and deadlines

_____

Added duties and estimated weekly time

_____

Who can decide what moves

_____

Work to stop, defer or reassign

_____

New owner, effective date and follow-up

_____

Manager follow-up message

"Thank you for speaking with me today. We agreed that Jordan will cover intake Thursday morning while you complete the report. I'll confirm Friday's priorities by noon tomorrow, and we'll meet next Tuesday to see whether the change gave you enough time. Let me know if new work comes in that conflicts with the plan."

HR review before corrective action

- Verify the events, dates, expectations and employee's explanation. Review how comparable situations were handled.
- Screen for a possible protected absence, request for an accommodation, pay concern, discrimination complaint or protected group activity. Assign any follow-up to the designated person.
- Separate restricted medical information from routine documentation. Confirm which facts can be used in a decision and whether the proposed action needs further review.
- Assign a separate owner and date for any workload or coverage problem the discussion revealed. [3–9]

Thirty-day review record

Problem and baseline measures

_____

Change and responsible leader

_____

Result and feedback from affected employees _____

Decision and next review date

_____

_

Conclusion

What Will Be Different on Monday

Think back to Maya looking at her phone on Sunday evening. Her supervisor can thank her for carrying the team. She may appreciate hearing it. What she needs to know by Monday morning is who's taking the escalations, whether the training has moved, and what to do if another department adds a deadline while she's trying to finish her report.

A few weeks later, Maya might still have a demanding job. The difference she can describe is that somebody else answered the calls on Thursday, and the report went out during her scheduled hours. When a new assignment came in, she knew who could decide which deadline moved. She could use the weekend for her own plans because there was someone scheduled to cover the line.

There's dignity in taking an employee seriously while they're still at work and still getting things done. When you can see what they are carrying, you can begin to make decisions about it. When they ask for help tied to a health concern, you can put them in touch with someone who knows how to respond and protect their privacy. When you tell the team something will change, you can put a name and a date on the promise.

If you're the person carrying the work, you deserve a conversation while there's still room to make a change. If you lead that person, look at the week ahead together. Choose a commitment you can keep. Then come back and ask whether it helped.

Sources and Further Reading

[1] World Health Organization
Burn-out as an occupational phenomenon in ICD-11

[2] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Surgeon General's framework for workplace mental health and well-being

[3] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
Depression, PTSD and other mental health conditions at work

[4] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
Disability-related inquiries and medical examinations under the ADA

[5] U.S. Department of Labor
Mental health conditions and the FMLA, Fact Sheet 28O

[6] U.S. Department of Labor
The FMLA leave process

[7] U.S. Department of Labor
Hours worked under the FLSA, Fact Sheet 22

[8] National Labor Relations Board
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[9] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
Reasonable accommodation and undue hardship under the ADA

[10] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and NIOSH
Impact Wellbeing Guide for healthcare leaders

[11] U.S. Department of Labor
Field Assistance Bulletin 2020-5 on tracking hours in remote work

[12] U.S. Department of Labor
FLSA protections against retaliation, Fact Sheet 77A