

# A Path to Stronger Programs, Greater Engagement, *and* Less Burnout?

Burnout can devastate your workplace. Here are ways to conquer it and make your organization more effective.

By Rachel Patterson

was having lunch with a friend the other day. He told me he loved his organization, but the frenetic pace, heavy workload, and lack of recognition were pushing him to burnout.

We talked about ways he could cope. I suggested a few strategies:

**Understand what you can control**, and let go of what you can't.

**Before reacting, take a deep breath**, and put yourself in the other's shoes to see why they might be saying what they're saying. They may be expressing professional and personal insights – or acting out their tensions. Either way, try not to take it personally.

**Analyze each deadline you're given** to clarify how urgent and important it is (or isn't). Some things are urgent but unimportant; others are important but not urgent. Which will move you closer to the goal? Going all-out to meet a deadline now and again won't hurt, as long as you pace yourself in other less-critical situations.

“Brain-wave analysis proves that walking increases divergent creativity.”

**Make sure the organization's leaders see articles** like this one (and others noted in “More on Organizational Culture, Burnout, & Performance Metrics” on page 30) about the importance of a culture that tracks both its program performance and its humanity (including its dedication to employee well-being). Once leaders understand that such a culture leads to greater productivity and saves a great deal of money over the long term, they'll pay attention.

That burnout conversation has become alarmingly frequent. To couch it in numerical terms, an estimated \$125 billion to \$190 billion is spent on healthcare in the U.S. for the psychological and physical problems of burned-out employees, and workplace stress contributes to 120,000 deaths a year.

While burnout occurs in all sectors, it's an especially enduring issue among those who work in the societal improvement space. Nonprofit goals, while inspiring, can be overwhelmingly large. It's easy to feel like you never do enough. Too many of us get caught on a gerbil wheel of constant doing.

The gerbil wheel serves no one. It zaps people of energy, creativity, and resilience. It creates high turnover, which leads to high recruiting and training costs as well as program interruptions or slowdowns.

Strategically, all of this highlights the need for nonprofit leaders to take a fresh look at the workplace and management. There are two vital things you can do to turn the situation around:

## 1. Enrich the Culture

To avoid the problem of burnout, it's crucial to create an organizational culture that's both goal-oriented and work-life balanced. Maintaining such a culture requires foresight and planning. For one thing, you need to consider how you'll manage situations where values clash. Suppose, for example, an employee has a sick child but is needed to meet an impending deadline. As a leader, you must weigh a number of values, including goal orientation, work-life balance, high-quality services, internal communication, and teamwork. How you handle the situation will communicate the culture to other employees. If meeting a deadline at all costs is always prioritized above employees' personal lives, you're not signaling a holistic culture. If, on the other hand, you turn to the team for solutions, you're creating a healthier, more team-focused environment.

It's important to remember that changing your culture starts at the top. People need to see their leaders modeling a behavior before they'll embrace it themselves. Here are some ideas for crafting a performance-based, wellness-grounded culture:

**Take time** to say “Thank you” and be grateful for people's efforts.

**Celebrate** whenever people reach a goal, either individually or as a team.

**Allow for life's ups and downs** and people's non-work responsibilities. Be generous with parental leave, sick days, and personal time off. Not only does such a policy reduce employee stress; it's a great recruiting tool.

**Embed learning** into the culture. Partner with employees in creating their own plans for training and development. Use coaching and mentoring to help people grow personally and professionally.

**Encourage moments of reflection** throughout the day. Such reflection is necessary for creative solutions and effective action.

**Clearly state employees' goals and deadlines, but grant them some flexibility** to manage their own time. They'll be more productive if they feel empowered to manage their projects and work when and where they have the most energy and focus.

**When you need to ask people to work especially long, hard hours to meet a deadline**, reward them afterwards. The reward needn't be elaborate or expensive. It can be as simple as ordering in lunch, doing an afternoon outing, bringing in a masseuse to offer 15-minute chair massages, or closing a few hours early one day.

**Offer people time** to exercise, meditate, and spend time in nature. Recent neurological studies show that spending time in green, natural settings decreases anxiety and increases people's focus as well as their ability to see links across programs and ideas. In addition, there's a synergistic effect when you combine the benefits of nature and exercise. (For more on the restorative power of nature, see "The Why & How of Adding Nature to the Workplace" on this page.)

**Promote healthy habits.** Provide access to stop-smoking clinics, stress-reduction classes, and the like. (Ask employees what they need and want.) Some organizations hire a wellness officer to encourage all to work but also exercise, take their breaks, and learn to eat nutritiously.

**Create rituals** that reinforce your commitment to wellness and appreciation of the mind-body connection. You might ring a bell at a certain time to encourage everyone to take a short walk, or begin each meeting by having everyone sit quietly, take three slow, deep breaths, and pause before starting in on the agenda. Or you could dedicate a room to peaceful, quiet time and suggest that everyone spend at least 20 minutes there each day.

**Solicit feedback** (verbally or via questionnaire, social media, suggestion box, whatever works for you) from employees, board members, and other stakeholders. You won't be able to implement everything in the short term, or even long term. Even so, consider every idea and respond with an open mind. People often have creative, strategic ideas, and they want to be heard.

## THE WHY & HOW OF ADDING NATURE TO THE WORKPLACE

Studies show that a dose of nature makes people healthier, happier, more creative, and more empathetic, while boosting their memory and ability to focus, solve problems, and make decisions. Yet surprisingly few workplaces make use of this magical ingredient to improve productivity and morale. There are some simple ways to integrate nature into the lives of your employees:

**If possible, give everyone an office with a window.** If that's not possible, see if you can create a relaxation space where people can look out onto some sort of greenery and blue sky. Just a few minutes at a window can drop people's blood pressure and improve their mood. While you're creating that peaceful spot, consider adding a fish tank and a small fountain (the sounds and sights of water are especially restorative).

**Provide time** for people to take walks – in natural settings if possible. Some of the greatest minds in history believed strongly in *solvitur ambulando* (in walking it will be solved) – the idea that walking leads to inspiration. Nowadays, brain-wave analysis proves that walking increases divergent creativity – the kind of thinking that includes brainstorming and innovative problem-solving.

**Line walls with paintings of natural scenes** in cool, restful colors such as blue and green. Gazing at such paintings reduces stress and leads to clearer thinking.

**Paint walls sky-blue** (the most serene of all the colors).

**Use full-spectrum lighting.** It's the next-best-thing to being outdoors.

**Add green plants** to people's offices and common areas.

**Hold walking meetings** in the outdoors.

**Whatever living things** you bring into the workplace – plants, fish, a small garden, or whatever your choice – rotate the job of caring for them so everyone experiences the benefits of nature first-hand.

**Make sure all employees** take their allotted vacation time.

**Plan occasional staff-board retreats** in natural settings. Getting away to a new habitat is a great way to spur innovation.

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— from *The Nature Fix* (W. W. Norton & Co., [www.norton.com](http://www.norton.com))

**Show that you view mistakes** as learning opportunities, not occasions for scolding. A learning organization will try and fail at times, just as a growing person will. Reward, rather than punish, people for coming forward to discuss their failures and resulting insights. And don't forget to share your own mistakes and what they've taught you.

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## 2. Create Motivating Performance Metrics

It's vital to measure your progress to find your celebration and anti-burnout points as well as to monitor and evaluate your programs. To do so, you need some motivating performance metrics to guide you along the path to your goals.

Developing such metrics is an imperfect science. But if you have ways to measure advancement toward interim and ultimate goals, you can create time for celebration whenever people complete a step toward those goals.

How can you craft your own monitoring and evaluation system? Here's how to get started:

**Take a 30-minute walk** in a peaceful place. As you walk, reflect on your organization's mission, and identify three to five broad goals that work toward achieving it.

**Back in the office, list the goals** you came up with.

**Think of three opportunities and three limitations in the wider environment** that may help or hinder you as you work toward those goals.

**List three to five steps** you can take to achieve each of your goals.

**Create monthly milestones** or performance metrics that will let you know if you're making the progress you want to make. Be sure these metrics include ways to measure your employees' wellness (for example, percentage of employees

who take more than eight sick days a year, or percentage of employees who take at least 75% of their vacation time).


**Combine these thoughts** with those of your leadership team and participating board members. Discuss and consolidate. These ideas will form the base of your strategic plan and related monitoring and evaluation system.

**Share this plan and system** with your staff. Then implement.

**Each week or month, arrange for employees** to meet with their managers. Each month or quarter, arrange for leaders to gather. In these meetings, focus discussion on what went well, what improvements are needed, which goals are still realistic and which may need to be changed. Then set modified time lines incorporating any new opportunities and challenges that have emerged. The employee-manager meetings will inform the leadership meetings. Real-world information will flow up and meet awareness of broad societal trends. Then you can modify the organizational goals and strategies accordingly, and strategic direction and guidelines will flow back down.

Monitoring and evaluation systems are crucial in explaining to prospective funders the tangible improvements you're making. They'll help you find stories to tell in your funding appeals, in data and anecdote form. They'll make evident the ways you're running a strategic, efficient, and humane organization for your clients and employees, while making progress toward societal transformation.

## Strike the Right Balance

So, yes, big goals can feel overwhelming and cause staff burnout in the "need" to do everything asap. But a strategic, caring culture will help. Such a culture will include organizational and program performance metrics, employee wellness metrics, and pauses for rest, reflection, and celebration. The result will be employees who are happier, able to channel their strategic thinking, and likely to stay engaged much longer, reducing turnover costs and program interruptions. Furthermore, the metrics make programs run more efficiently, and the resulting monitoring and evaluation system collects data and anecdotes that will engage and excite donors and other stakeholders. The shift to a performance-based, wellness-grounded culture takes time, but the benefits will ripple through your organization and all your activities. 

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### More on Organizational Culture, Burnout, & Performance Metrics

(NonprofitWorld.org)

**Measuring Outcomes in the Real World** (Vol. 30, No. 6)

**Why Your Employees Are Losing Motivation – and What to Do about It** (Vol. 29, No. 4)

**How to Change the World by Changing Your Culture** (Vol. 31, No. 2)

**Counteract Stress to Make the Best Decisions** (Vol. 28, No. 1)

**Want to Hire Top Talent? Create an Irresistible Culture** (Vol. 33, No. 4)

**Performance-Based Management Builds Funding & Support** (Vol. 23, No. 6)

**The High Cost of Employee Turnover – and How to Avoid It** (Vol. 31, No. 3)

**Organizational Culture: It's in the Walk, Not Just the Talk** (Vol. 29, No. 6)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Outcome Measurement (NonprofitWorld.org/LearningInstitute).