



5 ways to avoid burnout



Employees get a lot of advice about “beating burnout.” The tips range from mindful breathing to baking cookies, from petting a cat to yoga, from positive self-talk to taking a “mental health day.” None of this is bad advice (provided you’re not allergic to cats or cookies), but we think it tends to miss the point and shift the onus away from the primary source of **workplace burnout**: the workplace.

Burnout: “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed” – World Health Organization

If you’re reading this, you’re probably already on board with the idea that companies bear a major responsibility for the well-being of their employees. (What’s that behind you? Oh, it’s the curve, because you’re way ahead of it.)

If you’re skeptical, think of it this way: your environment affects your mood. You feel better at home when your space is clean. Or on a flight when the person in front of you hasn’t reclined all the way into your lap. Or at a party when you get along with everyone there. You get the idea.

The workplace – whether that’s a physical space like an office or a virtual one – is the environment in which we spend most of our waking hours, so the way our work makes us feel is **how we usually feel**.

An individual employee’s control over their workplace environment is limited. Their responsibilities, the support they get from their managers, the way they’re treated – all of these are major drivers of burnout, and they’re all influenced by the company itself, from the top down. Like mildew grows in a wet shower curtain, burnout prospers in a workplace where people don’t feel supported or valued.

Company leaders have a responsibility to create an environment where burnout isn’t able to take hold. Here are Bravely’s top five tips for preventing burnout.

1. Empower managers to build trust.

Trust is the foundation on which all managers must build their working relationships.

The ability to earn and maintain trust is often overlooked, but without it, other key manager skills (giving actionable feedback, delegating, and time management) are moot.

Without a trusting relationship with their managers, people feel powerless to keep burnout at bay. Trust allows them to speak openly about any issues they may be having before they become a source of burnout. When someone trusts their manager, they become a partner in removing roadblocks and maintaining balance.

Companies can instill the importance of trust in a variety of ways. On a formal level, trust should play an integral role in engagement surveys, performance reviews, and development programs. Do you know which teams in your organization have high manager trust and which don't? How are managers who have built high-trust relationships rewarded?

More informally, embrace "trust" as part of the company lexicon. Speak about its importance in onboarding or when diagnosing issues on the team. Identify which of the company values are related to trust, and call that out explicitly where possible.

Finally, be a model. When leaders at the top demonstrate authenticity, vulnerability, and transparency, leaders at all levels are influenced by the example.

2. Don't take role clarity for granted.

Does everyone at your organization understand the particulars of their role and the scope of their responsibilities?

How do you know?

Role clarity isn't a given, even at highly-structured organizations. New hires, new projects, new priorities – all of these things can raise questions about even the most solidified job descriptions.

When someone doesn't have clarity about the boundaries of their role, they may become frustrated, and stress can start to accumulate. They're more likely to experience conflict with teammates whose roles intersect with theirs, and they may struggle with a sense of underperforming, being overworked, or both.

Use the "moments that matter" in the employee experience to revisit job descriptions, and leave communication channels open for people to ask questions about their roles and expectations.



3. Make expectations a conversation.

“Where do I stand? ... Should I be doing more? ... How do I find out?”

Questions like these, left unanswered, give rise to anxiety and can take a toll.

Having clear expectations supports an employee's mental health. People need to know what they're expected to achieve, what norms they're expected to abide by, and how their performance is perceived.

Not only should expectations be communicated, they should be set in conversation between manager and employee. Autonomy is critical to employee engagement – when people feel they've had some say in what's expected of them, they're far more committed to it.

There also needs to be accountability in both directions. If a manager sets expectations that aren't met, but then fails to follow up, they're undermining trust by sending the message that the expectations don't actually matter.

In the new world of work, companies are more conscious than ever of the fact that outside circumstances are affecting everyone's lives at work. There's a spectrum between ruthlessly holding people accountable to their workload and being empathetic at the expense of productivity, and it can feel challenging to strike the right balance. Mutual understanding of expectations makes it much easier.



4. Value innovation.

People are freer to innovate in a workplace where they feel celebrated and appreciated for who they are.

The mental and emotional energy needed to work in an unsafe environment precludes creativity, and wears one down over time.

In the other direction, the opportunity to innovate and take risks supports a sense of belonging and well-being. If the three Cs of belonging are comfort, connection, and contribution, then innovation falls squarely under the third C. People need to feel that their contributions matter, and they want to show what they're capable of when given the freedom, resources, and encouragement.

In a hybrid workplace, it may be more challenging than ever for your people – especially individual contributors or people at the lower rungs – to break out of “survival mode” and truly innovate. And why should they if they're not being incentivized to do so?

Leaders must find new windows for new ideas and collaboration to shine. Define what innovation means at your company or on your team. Set clear goals around it – on the organization level and on an individual basis. Consider how innovation is reflected in performance conversations. Finally, as with all your values, find ways to reward employees who exemplify a spirit of innovation.



5. Put purpose first.

When people feel like their work matters, they're motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically.

A sense of purpose and connectedness to one's work is a major buffer against burnout.

To support people in finding their sense of purpose, the company must communicate its purpose. Ensure that your entire team is intimately familiar with the company's mission and goals. Most mission statements are written with the customer in mind; consider supplementing yours with an employee-facing one.

Going one step further, each person at the organization should understand how their role fits in the big picture of the company mission. When they know the paths open to them, including internal mobility and professional skill development, they're more likely to stay engaged and excited about their work.



Summary

It's up to People leaders to build a company culture that protects against burnout. To do this, they should focus on providing clarity, supporting belonging, and increasing employee autonomy.

About Bravely

Bravely connects people to on-demand confidential coaching in the moments that matter across the employee experience. Access to Bravely's network of vetted professional coaches fosters well-being and development to supercharge performance and let people thrive.

When leading organizations offer Bravely to everyone, they scale the support offered by their People teams and managers, and transform their cultures in an evolving world of work.

To learn more, get in touch: workbravely.com/request-a-demo.

