First Aid for Burned-Out Teams

By Kate Zabriskie

The team's exhausted. They're burned-out, and I am too. I don't know if we can recover. We've been working at 150% for over a year – at least most of us have.

More change? Really? We've been through three major transitions in as many months. Everyone is really on edge. I am pretty sure Susan is going to quit.

Team? We work in the same building, but that's about where it starts and stops. I'm hoping to get out of here soon.

Even in the best of times, creating and maintaining a high-functioning team is work. When the team is burned-out, the task is infinitely harder, but it can be done.

STEP ONE

The first step is accepting a list of truths.

Truth One: People have different levels of buy-in, a range of professional goals, and varying home/work demands.

Truth Two: Not everyone experiences burnout in the same way nor is work always distributed evenly in most organizations. Some people probably are more burned-out than others.

Truth Three: Great teamwork will compensate for a lack of resources in the short term. However, teams that are stretched too thin for too long begin to show signs of wear and tear after a while.

Truth Four: If the leader isn't a believer in what the team needs to accomplish or isn't working as hard as he or she can to bring the team over the finish line each day, team members will know it and react in a range of ways—most of which are neutral at best.

Truth Five: Transparency matters. People don't like being left in the dark, or worse still, lied to.

Truth Six: Too many changes at once usually don't go over well unless there's a logical flow to them, a sense of fairness about what's being changed, and the absence of unnecessary chaos or drama.

Truth Seven: Elephants in a room stay there if they're allowed to do so. If a team is not prepared to operate with candor and address any unspoken issues, there's only so much that can be done to save the group.

Truth Eight: Team members' perceptions of the team's condition are their truth. You may have plenty of data to argue to the contrary, but until people are ready to listen and believe what you show them, what they currently think is what is.

STEP TWO

Once you've got a firm understanding of the basic truths, the next step is taking a long and hard look at what's working, what isn't, and why. Does everyone understand and buy into the team's mission? Is work distributed fairly? Are some people doing more than they should have to do and others doing less than they should? Are people resentful of each other? Is there drama, and do you know the source? Is the team's burnout a recent phenomenon or has its decay been long in the making? Is the burnout caused by internal factors, external factors, or a combination of both? Have people been misled or lied to in the past by those in positions of authority?

Those questions are just the tip of the iceberg and some ideas to get started. In fixing burnout, asking the right questions is as important, if not more, so than taking action. A good list of questions will help you reduce the likelihood that you are treating symptoms or curing the wrong disease altogether.

STEP THREE

When you think you have a good grasp of the current situation and have verified your findings with others, it's time to start thinking about what could be. A fast way to imagine a different state is to work through some more questions.

- Why does our team matter to the organization and what value do we offer?
- How do we want to feel about our work?
- What gets us excited about our work or what do we enjoy?
- What changes do we need to our work product, our work processes, or our people interactions?
- What needs to stay the same?
- What level of performance do we need from each team member?
- What are we going to do if those levels aren't met?
- What additional resources do we need?
- What would success look like?
- What can we do to encourage transparency and communication?
- How will we celebrate improvements?

STEP FOUR

With a clear view of the present and a possible future, the next step is prioritizing. In most cases, burned-out teams don't burn out overnight. Often the process is long and marked by a series of declines, bad luck, and unfortunate circumstances. Consequently, the recovery process is often long. In fact, the team may never realize some of the elements identified in step three for a long time, or maybe ever. Most recoveries don't happen overnight. The trick is to keep the truths discussed in step one in mind as you prioritize a plan of action to get from the reality you uncovered in step two and the future you envisioned in step three.

STEP FIVE

The final step in the recovery planning process is creating a deliberate communication plan. Recognize that you need to over explain and repeatedly share information. Once is not enough. Also, not all recoveries are linear. Your team will have some good days and bad. What's important is making progress in the right direction over time. After a series of successes, everyone who is still with the group should be feeling a little less burned-out and a lot more excited about the work at hand.

With these five steps well in hand, you're positioned to provide some immediate triage to your team members that are battling burnout. Burnout can be pervasive throughout an entire company, so get your first-aid kit out as soon as you pick up on the problem, and mitigate the issue before it negatively impacts your operation.

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