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Job Burnout: The "Dark Side" of Job Stress

Do you ever get the sense that a person you work with is drained mentally, emotionally, or physically? Does a coworker seem withdrawn or detached from the job? Does an employee you supervise have a negative attitude about the work, the organization, the people he/she works with, or customers and stakeholders?

Does a coworker ever hint—or actually say—that they are accomplishing little or nothing? Do you ever feel like this? Almost everyone has had a bad day at work. But if this happens frequently, you may be witnessing (or experiencing) *burnout* at work. This article provides a summary of insights from research to help readers recognize, understand, and address burnout.

How do you recognize burnout?

Research has identified three common characteristics of burnout:¹

- *Exhaustion*—an intense and enduring sense of overload from work matters or work-related interpersonal dynamics;
- *Cynicism*—negativity or indifference towards matters or people at work; and
- *Inefficiency*—a persistent sense of futility or failure at work.

Thus, burnout is both a way that a person experiences work and a response to

that experience.² This means that burnout should be addressed by understanding and improving the work experience, as outlined below, rather than ignoring or suppressing the response (*e.g.*, hoping employees will “adjust their attitudes” or telling employees to “get over it”).

What can cause burnout?

Burnout typically results from aspects of the work environment rather than an employee's personal characteristics.³ Very broadly, burnout is caused by persistent stress and overload related to work, work-related interpersonal exchanges, or the work setting. Examples of situations that can lead to burnout are:

- Too much work to do and too little time to do it, coupled with a shortage of supervisory support and an excess of supervisory criticism;
- Too much responsibility, conflicting expectations, and a lack of direction and clarity on priorities;
- Work that is emotionally stressful in and of itself or requires emotionally challenging interpersonal exchanges; and
- Persistent conflict in the workplace.⁴

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1. Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W.B., & Leiter, M.P. (2001). Job Burnout. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, pgs. 397-422.

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.* See pp. 407-416 for additional factors.

4. For more information on emotional strain in jobs, see U.S. MSPB, Emotional Labor: Often Overlooked, Always Present. *Issues of Merit Newsletter*, Winter 2015, pgs. 1 & 7.

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DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

There Must be a Better Way to Make Federal HR Policy

In too many instances, the Federal HR policymaking mechanism in today's decentralized personnel system is ineffective. As three examples discussed below show, bringing a Federal-sector personnel policy change from concept to reality takes too long. The process is also wasteful; not designed for success; and is too dependent on sometimes-unwilling actors.

A lengthy process. Consider how long it sometimes takes to translate Federal HR policy into practice:

- On July 6, 2012, phased retirement for Federal employees was authorized by statute.¹ Just over two years later, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) issued implementing rules.² Guidance released subsequently by the Chief Human Capital Officers Council required agencies to devise "written criteria" before allowing employees to participate in phased retirement. The first agency known to have established such criteria was the Library of Congress, in May 2015.³ To date, 3-1/2 years after the authorizing statute was passed, most agencies still have not established phased retirement programs.
- On December 27, 2010, the President authorized three new Federal hiring programs, known collectively as Pathways.⁴ On May 11, 2012, OPM issued

implementing rules. Those rules provide that an agency must enter into a memorandum of understanding with OPM before making any appointments under Pathways, although such a memorandum is "not require[d] within any particular timeframe."⁵ Five years after Pathways was authorized, at least one agency was still working on its Pathways plan.

- On November 25, 2002, category rating of applicants for Federal jobs was authorized by statute as an alternative to traditional rating and ranking.⁶ OPM issued implementing rules on June 15, 2004 that provided further details. The rules also gave agencies the option of using this new examination method, which was billed as an improvement over the old one, as long as agencies devised their own category rating systems.⁷ Six years later, the President directed agencies to stop using traditional rating and ranking and to use category rating exclusively.⁸

The pattern demonstrated above is a familiar one. Basic authority for a policy change is established, which triggers the administrative rulemaking process, which is followed by agency-level directives; only after all three steps are complete will the policy change begin to take effect. This process can take a long time, causing frustration for managers, HR officials,

(continued, page 3)

1. Pub. L. No. 112-141, § 100121, 126 Stat. 906.
2. 79 Fed. Reg. 46608 (Aug. 8, 2014).
3. Meet a Federal Phased-Retirement Pioneer, *Washington Post*, (May 27, 2015).
4. Exec. Order No. 13562.

5. 77 Fed. Reg. 28194, 28197.

6. Pub. L. No. 107-296, § 1312(a)(2), 116 Stat. 2290.

7. 69 Fed. Reg. 33276.

8. Presidential Memorandum—*Improving the Federal Recruitment and Hiring Process* (May 11, 2010).

Director's Perspective

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and individuals who have an interest in a timely rollout of a solution to the problem that the policy change was intended to address.

Wastefulness. The framework for Federal HR policy change also requires that mini policy shops be maintained in each agency. As shown by the phased retirement and Pathways examples above, each agency must develop and maintain the capacity to analyze a human capital problem after it has been centrally identified and design a corresponding program for that agency. This creates the potential for waste, with dozens of departments and agencies devoting resources to designing customized plans that address the same issue.

Hit or miss. It is not asking too much that Federal employees be managed according to best practices. Yet, the reigning model allows for the possibility that only some agency programs that carry out a policy change will be based on best practices, while other agencies will end up with flawed or unsuccessful versions of those programs.

Breakdown. Finally, the multi-step process for transforming a Federal HR policy change from concept to reality assumes that key agency officials across the government have the will to make the change. This assumption is not always warranted. For example, after

many years of having category rating available as a supposedly superior alternative to traditional rating and ranking, agencies had to be ordered to employ category rating exclusively because so few were using it. To take another example, most Federal employees remained unable to apply for phased retirement three years after the statutory authority for phased retirement was enacted, because they worked in agencies that had not put the required written criteria in place.⁹

Conclusion. It is worth considering whether the price of the oft-used model for HR policy change outlined above—with its inherent delays, duplication of resources, and potential for faulty or no implementation at the agency level—is worth paying in order to preserve agency autonomy. For some issues, a centrally-developed, turnkey solution to a problem that policymakers have determined must be addressed will be preferable to a slow, multi-step, atomized approach. ❖

9. HUD Becomes First Major Department to Offer Phased Retirement for Employees, *Government Executive*, (September 21, 2015). Agencies are not required to offer phased retirement.

James Read
Director, Policy and Evaluation

The 2016 Merit Principles Survey is Here!

Nearly 120,000 Federal civilian employees are receiving the same email message. No, it's not advertising spam from an overzealous software company. And no, a new employee did not accidentally send a message to: all_employees@us.gov. This group of employees is being invited to participate in MSPB's 2016 Merit Principles Survey (MPS 2016). MSPB is working with our contractor ZeroedIn to administer the survey.

You may be one of these employees! Watch for an email invitation from MSPB that contains a direct link to the MPS 2016. Note that the web-based questionnaire will take around 30 minutes to complete. You may complete it in one session or across multiple sessions. The unique link in your email invitation will ensure that you are the only survey participant who can see your responses, and, if you need multiple sessions to complete the survey, this link will enable you to return to where you left off. Your opinions will be kept in confidence.

MSPB thanks you in advance for taking the time to provide your views of the Federal civil service during these interesting times. Aggregate data from this survey will be used to support several studies, the results of which will be shared with Congress, the President, the media, agency leaders, and other stakeholders. This is an opportunity for you to influence policymakers! Additionally, look for discussions of survey results in future *Issues of Merit* newsletters. For questions about the MPS 2016, contact us at: MPS2016@mspb.gov.

Federal Employee Retention: If We Hire Them, Can We Keep Them?

Many observers wonder whether the Federal Government will be able to recruit the people needed to replace retiring employees and fill new roles and positions. However, recruitment is only one battle in the war for talent. A well-written job announcement, a rigorous assessment program, and a timely job offer do little good if a new hire does not stay to make a measurable contribution. This article offers some suggestions for agencies seeking to retain and engage new employees, based on a look at new hires in 2011 and 2012.

There is reason for optimism—but not complacency.

As shown in the table to the right, most new Federal employees appear willing to give the Federal Government a chance to make its case as an employer—at least for the short term. Among the more than 300,000 new hires appointed in fiscal years 2011 and 2012, 91% were on the rolls one year after appointment.

Focus on the job rather than the generation.

Retention rates differ much more across occupations than they do across lines of age, sex, or ethnicity and race. For example, the challenge of retaining Millennials is real, but pales next to the challenges of retaining physician assistants (two-year retention rate of only 73%) and materials handlers (two-year retention rate of only 65%).

Such occupational differences do much to explain why some good managers may find themselves continually recruiting, while some ineffective supervisors still manage to have capable and committed staff because the jobs “sell themselves.”

Hard-to-fill may be different from hard-to-keep.

When trying to understand retention trends, agencies should rely on *data*—rather than perceptions of talent scarcity. Much attention has been focused on occupations such as information technology and engineering. Retention in professional occupations is indeed lower, overall, than in administrative occupations. However, retention is lower yet in the “Other” occupational category, which includes protective occupations such as police officer and firefighter.

Salary and benefits are not the only conditions of employment that matter. Concern about competitive pay and benefits is understandable in light of past pay freezes and proposed changes to retirement benefits. However, agencies should not overlook work/life balance, respect

and inclusion, equitable allocation of work assignments, and appropriate recognition. Agencies cannot rely on a reasonable paycheck and the promise of an eventual retirement annuity to make up for an unrewarding job or an unsupportive work environment. ❖

Retention of New Hires in FY 2011 and 2012			
	<u>Hires</u>	<u>Retained</u>	
		<i>1 year</i>	<i>2 years</i>
TOTAL	313,948	91%	85%
<u>Occupational Category</u>			
Professional	78,668	92%	86%
Administrative	97,678	94%	91%
Technical	54,218	88%	82%
Clerical	23,696	87%	79%
Other	26,866	85%	78%
Blue Collar	32,775	90%	85%
<u>Age Group</u>			
24 and under	30,657	90%	82%
25-34	105,672	91%	85%
35-44	81,510	91%	87%
45-54	69,539	91%	87%
55 and over	26,570	88%	83%
<u>Sex</u>			
Women	122,024	90%	84%
Men	191,924	91%	87%
<u>Agency (Selected)</u>			
Air Force	35,176	94%	89%
Army	52,750	91%	84%
DHS	19,662	91%	87%
EPA	1,328	95%	90%
HHS	12,407	89%	81%
Justice	17,211	92%	88%
NASA	1,172	95%	89%
SEC	623	97%	93%
SSA	7,128	92%	89%
Transportation	4,844	93%	90%
Treasury	7,066	90%	85%
VA	61,034	87%	80%

Source: MSPB analysis of data from OPM's Central Personnel Data File.

Agencies: Be Alert for Signs of SES Derailment

“Going off the rails” is an expression that evokes a visual image. In terms of executive derailment, it occurs when “people who are highly skilled, knowledgeable in their field, fail. They are people who, prior to failing, were very successful.”¹ While the focus of this article is on executive derailment, the reality is that employees at all organizational levels can derail. In essence, derailed employees have departed the track of expected continued success. Thus, the information below is also pertinent to understanding performance problems for managers, supervisors, and employees alike.

The costs of derailment can be wasted talent, failure to achieve organizational goals, and decreased morale and engagement. This is especially problematic in the leadership ranks because leaders are responsible for executing agency goals and missions and directing the work of their subordinates. Consequently, organizations should stay alert for signs of potential derailment and take steps to help prevent it.

Warning signs. The indicators of derailment are not mutually exclusive and include:²

- *Problems with interpersonal relationships.* An executive may experience sudden interpersonal problems with the supervisor or peers. Similarly, individuals in other leadership roles such as first-line supervisors or managers may also experience problems with their direct reports.
- *Inability to build and lead a team.* Executives may fail to staff effectively or manage direct reports appropriately. They may have challenges determining appropriate resources; delegating work; soliciting ideas from others; sharing decision-making; or seeing the bigger organizational picture.
- *Failure to meet business objectives.* Executives may experience performance problems following previously good results. The change from positive to substandard results may be due to an over-reliance on certain skills or failure to acquire new ones.

- *Inability to change or adapt.* An executive may be unable to adapt to changes such as a supervisor with a different management style; a new role, position, or change in duties; or a shift in organizational culture. Skills that were important at one point in a person’s career may be less useful or even counterproductive in new roles or environments.

Although consistently associated with derailment, the above problems singly or in combination may not always lead to derailment. Nonetheless, it would be wise for organizations to take proactive steps to help prevent derailment, especially if they perceive these kinds of problems.

Proactive steps. Some actions supervisors of executives can take are:³

- Be attentive to persistent interpersonal problems even though the executive is producing results.
- Promote continuous learning to ensure executives have the skills necessary to meet complex and ever-changing demands; new priorities and technology; as well as heightened visibility and accountability.
- Provide necessary training and development aligned with executives’ needs and the organization’s goals and resources.⁴
- Ensure executives have access to the necessary resources (e.g., coach, mentor, adequate staff, appropriate technology) to succeed at complex projects.
- Examine existing organizational policies and practices such as flexible work scheduling, employee assistance programs, and work/life balance options to help create an environment conducive to success.

The types of actions recommended above are consistent with good management. Organizations that consistently implement such actions are likely to have a greater capacity for both preventing executive derailment and improving overall performance. ❖

1. Carpetta, C., Clark, L., & Guagrone, D. (2008). Executive derailment: Three cases in point and how to prevent it. *Global Business & Organizational Excellence*, 27(3), pgs. 48-56.

2. Harrison, J. (2006). *How to prevent executive derailment*. Accessed at: <http://www.cipd.co.uk/pm/peoplemanagement/b/weblog/archive/2006/09/88/howto-2006-09.aspx>; Leslie, J.B. & VanVelsor, E. (1996). *A look at derailment today: North America and Europe*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership; and Frankel, L.P. (1994). Preventing individuals’ career derailment. *Employee Relations Today*, pgs. 1-9.

3. Harrison, J. (2006). *How to prevent executive derailment*. Accessed at: <http://www.cipd.co.uk/pm/peoplemanagement/b/weblog/archive/2006/09/88/howto-2006-09.aspx>; and McCauley, C. *Are you guilty of aiding derailment?* Posted on August 14, 2014 and accessed at: <http://www.leadingeffectively.com/are-you-guilty-of-aiding-derailment/>.

4. For information about SES training and development activities, their advantages, disadvantages, costs, and circumstances where they are most appropriately used, see: U.S. MSPB, *Training and Development for the Senior Executive Service: A Necessary Investment*, December 2015.

SES Training and Development Pays Off

Senior Executives are relatively few in number, but arguably have greater impact than any other group of career Federal employees. How do senior executives learn to exercise this influence responsibly, make effective decisions, and lead their organizations to success? Of course, some measure of their competence stems from natural leadership ability and some leaders have developed their abilities through past work and educational experiences. But most will sharpen their leadership abilities on the job using training and development (T&D) resources available to members of the Senior Executive Service (SES). A recently released MSPB report examines the strategies used to select T&D experiences from the many available options.

As part of this study, MSPB analyzed the Office of Personnel Management’s most recent (2011) Senior Executive Service survey results to identify which types of T&D executives chose most often. We were able to classify the 4,624 SES members from 28 Federal agencies into 5 distinct groups based on the pattern of T&D they chose. The table below describes these groups and the percentage of SES survey participants classified into each.

T&D Activities	Percent
Committed Self-Developers will <i>likely</i> have attended residential and short-term executive development programs; have had a 360-degree assessment; and have mentors and development plans.	22.8 %
Resident Mentors are <i>likely</i> to have and be mentors; do a 360-degree assessment; be formally coached; and attend short-term/on-line training. They are <i>less likely</i> to take sabbaticals, attend remote executive training, or engage in long-term developmental assignments.	18.6 %
Casual Self-Developers are <i>likely</i> only to have taken on-line training and <i>may also</i> have had a 360-degree assessment and possibly coaching and short-term executive development. They are <i>less likely</i> to have mentors or engage in long-term developmental assignments or residential training programs.	11.6 %
Resident Trainees are <i>likely</i> to attend short-term or on-line training and have development plans. They are <i>less likely</i> to have had coaching/mentors or attend remote or long-term training.	24.0 %
Minimalists are <i>likely</i> only to serve as mentors but <i>may also</i> do a 360-degree assessment or an occasional short-term/on-line training program.	22.9 %

Our study next considered whether there was a relationship between Senior Executive T&D strategies and employee perceptions of their employing organizations. To test this relationship, we first examined results of the 2011 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), specifically the Human Capital Assessment and Accountability Framework (HCAAF) Index

scores including those for “Leadership and Knowledge Management.” This index reflects employees’ views of leaders’ and managers’ ability to effectively manage people, ensure continuity of leadership, and sustain a learning environment that drives continuous improvement in performance. We then classified 28 participating agencies as high, mid-level, and low based on their Satisfaction with Leadership and Knowledge Management Index scores. We also classified the agencies as having high, moderate, or low concentrations of SES in each of the 5 T&D preference groups.

Agencies with the highest concentrations of executives who engaged in more T&D had *more favorable* employee opinions of Leadership & Knowledge Management than did agencies with higher concentrations of executives who engaged in less T&D. Specifically, agencies where employees had high regard for leadership had more *Committed Self-Developers* (44.4%) and *Resident Mentors* (44.4%) than agencies where employees had low regard for leadership, which had 22.2% *Committed Self-Developers* and 33.3% *Resident Mentors*. The same pattern applies to leaders who engage in less

T&D. Agencies where employees had low regard for leadership had more *Minimalists* (55.6%) and *Resident Trainees* (66.7%) than agencies where employees had high regard for leadership, which had 22.2% *Minimalists* and 22.2% *Resident Trainees*. This is evidence that agencies where SES engage in more T&D are more likely to have employees with favorable perceptions of SES leadership.

We found similar results for employees’ engagement levels and perceptions of their agencies’ talent management efforts. We examined these relationships using 2012 FEVS responses to see if the same pattern held a year later. Agencies with higher concentrations of well-trained and developed SES in 2011 still enjoyed more

favorable employee perceptions of agency leadership in 2012. This research suggests that investing in and supporting senior leadership T&D can pay dividends in how employees view senior leadership. In well-funded agencies where leadership T&D is readily available, senior leadership can benefit the agency as well as themselves by engaging in it. ❖

Burnout...

(continued from page 1)

The key, though, for understanding the causes of burnout is to focus on the “fit”—or lack thereof—between the employee and the job and job context. A particular aspect of the work context can have different effects on different people. Six aspects that are important to this “fit” include:

- *Workload*—whether the amount, types, and emotional demands are appropriate;
- *Control*—whether the employee has a sufficient level of autonomy and responsibility, participation in work-related decisions, and necessary resources;
- *Rewards*—whether the employee receives pay and benefits commensurate with the work’s value, feels positive about work (e.g., finds it enjoyable, meaningful, purposeful), and receives appropriate appreciation and recognition;
- *Community*—whether the work environment and personal interactions are positive and supportive;
- *Fairness*—perceived equity in outcomes/treatment; and
- *Values*—congruence between the employee’s personal beliefs, values, and ethics and the employer’s requirements and expectations.⁵

What can be done to prevent or mitigate burnout?

Federal work and missions can be highly demanding, especially in an era of fiscal and hiring austerity. Supervisors cannot relieve employees of every workplace demand or stress. Supervisors can, however, take steps to understand the challenges employees face, assess the risk of burnout, and try to eliminate or reduce mismatches between job demands and employee capacity. The key to understanding and effective action is *communication*. Supervisors should have regular conversations with employees about their work experience and attend to both what employees say, and do not say, as well as what such responses may imply. Below are four areas of conversation that can be a starting point for understanding and addressing employees’ risk for burnout.

Conversations about work: Do employees think that their work expectations and demands are realistic given their available resources, both personal (e.g., time and skills) and organizational (e.g., funds and staff)? Are employees receiving the right feedback, mentoring, and developmental opportunities to be effective?

Conversations about engagement: Are employees doing the kinds of work that they find meaningful and purposeful? Do employees perceive their jobs to have positive features like important work, variety in tasks, and autonomy?⁶ Is the work environment conducive to engagement through good leadership, performance management, and opportunities to develop? Do employees perceive fairness in formal compensation and informal recognition such as gratitude and appreciation?

Conversations about well-being: Ask employees to tell you if they experience prolonged weariness, fatigue, and exhaustion related to work. Are there chronic job stressors that are causing adverse effects? Do employees perceive that they have appropriate work/life balance?

Conversations about the work environment: Look for signs of persistent workplace conflict and interpersonal hostilities and follow-up with employees to learn more and address issues. Are there signs of frequent systematic interpersonal aggression, particularly harassment or bullying?⁷ Do employees feel included and “safe” in their workplace? Are they receiving the support necessary from you and their coworkers to be effective in their jobs?

This article is meant to complement, rather than redirect, a heightened attention to employee engagement from Federal agencies and managers. The supervisors most successful at sustaining employee engagement will not only accentuate the *positive*, but will strive to understand—and reduce or eliminate—the *negative*. Thus, managers are encouraged to be sensitive to signs of burnout and promote a better work experience for all. ❖



6. See U.S. MSPB, *Federal Employee Engagement: The Motivating Potential of Job Characteristics and Rewards*, December 2012.

7. Burnout is just one of several adverse correlates of workplace bullying. Additional correlates include mental and physical health problems, intent to leave, and reduced job satisfaction and commitment. For a review see: Nielsen, M.B. & Einarsen, S. (2012). Outcomes of exposure to workplace bullying: A meta-analytic review, *Work & Stress*, 26, pgs. 309-332.

5. Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W.B., & Leiter, M.P. (2001). Job Burnout. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, pgs. 397-422.



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