

Jumping into the abyss: an exploration of the concept of Organizational Burnout

Abstract

Whilst the primary focus concerning burnout at work has been at individual and job level (Maslach, Demeteriou, Leiter, Schaufeli), very little academic literature or research has addressed the concept of “organization level burnout”.

Within the context of continuous organizational change and heightening competitiveness at work, it could be argued that there is a greater propensity for individuals to be working within teams, divisions and possibly organizations which are suffering from burnout. This paper explores the concept of organizational burnout by outlining traditional definitions of burnout, analysing the differing levels of burnout and how these are measured at individual and job level, then extrapolating from that to an organizational level of analysis. Following that, suggestions for further research and understanding of organizational level burnout will be explored together with providing some practical managerial interventions.

The context of change

The concept of successfully managing organizational change is not a new one, but more recently, the pace and scope of change has been unprecedented. A heightened increase in agility from organizations to move from a new strategy to the next one is paramount. However, where do employees fit within this change in terms of expectations and performance? How long can employees (managers and workers) remain highly involved in a range of contiguous change interventions, working on several business strategies, and in some cases, increased competitive work pressures? Stuart (1996) develops this concept and argues that the ‘trauma of continuous organizational change’ has a significant negative impact on employees which can lead to emotional and physical exhaustion.

Pettigrew and Whipp (1991) argue that most change management programmes assume that change is an exceptional episode, but in reality, most employees contend with ongoing change, which in effect may dilute the credibility of management demands for the employee to provide maximum effort (or “give one’s all”). When change occurs, Gifford et al (2010) argue that employees endure the following set of concerns:

- Loss of organizational or service identity in the case of mergers and acquisitions
- Changes in team structures and potential loss of relationships with colleagues, especially long standing relationships that are seen to be the most productive
- Changes that employees feared might impact upon their ability to do their job or to provide what they see as a good quality of service
- Loss of job security – where there was a threat of job losses, it was often all-consuming and employees found it difficult to see beyond this
- Increased workload and pressure, which could result in normally engaged employees beginning to feel that their good will was being exploited

Some financial institutions undertake organizational ‘stress tests’ to assess their durability and survival in a turbulent economic environment. Whilst it may be possible to assess the level and utility of financial capital, can organizations assess whether their human capital is close to collapse?

So when do organizations become exhausted? Perhaps at the point an organization has reached saturation (Marks 2003), or at the point of inflection, and where performance, output, efficiency etc. plunges dramatically. Marks (2003), argues that multiple waves of change lead to a “saturation effect” within organizations, resulting in a deterioration of performance that emerges from dealing with stress and uncertainty. A report by PricewaterhouseCoopers cited in MacLeod and Clarke (2009) found that nine out of ten of the key barriers to the success of change programmes are people related. Organizations should therefore place considerable emphasis upon the people factors and the employment relationship during times of change, and more so in times of harsh economic cost cutting and asset stripping. The need to introduce change correctly at strategic, tactical and operation level is the key to successful change initiatives.

The need for change initiatives

Given the managerial license for change within a turbulent economic context, do organizations really need to change, and perhaps change so frequently? Results from a recent survey of over 1500 executives involved in a wide variety of change initiatives indicated that only 38% thought these initiatives were successful and only 30% thought they contributed to the sustained improvement of their organizations (Erwin and Garman 2010). To what extent are organizations changing, and changing simply for the sake of change? If organizational change is then carried out, what is the ability of the organization to carry out and cope with the change? Where there are contiguous change interventions, employees need to know why the changes are being brought about, or risk becoming alienated from the change process.

Abrahamson (2004) posits that there has been negative, not neutral impact upon employee spirit, work team performance and organizational effectiveness resulting from continuous changes and transitions in the workplace. Marris (1974) equates change with bereavement; hence employees need time to recover from changes, and a period of acceptance of the changes. Implicit to this argument is the principle that organizations should not go through continuous changes.

The negative change spiral

Bruch and Menges (2010) argue that the habit of constant change makes organizations fall into an acceleration trap, which impacts negatively upon performance, efficiency, effectiveness, employee productivity and retention in particular. There are 3 ways in which companies fall into this trap:

- Employees are overloaded with too many activities, with lack of time to complete their jobs.
- “Multi-loading” – by asking employees to carry out too many kinds of activities, resulting in misaligned work.
- Perpetual loading - by not allowing employees to recharge their batteries, resulting in possible retrenchment.

To some extent, the concept of retrenchment echoes withdrawal behaviours, which in turn result in poorer performance, productivity and retention. Bruch and Menges (2010) argue that consolidation rather than expansion is required in order to avoid the acceleration trap. Additionally, a clear strategy of what needs to be done, how decisions are arrived at is required, and once completed, “declare the turmoil over”. Perhaps a moratorium on change

projects will assist in the necessary post change spring-cleaning. The lack of planning and review of organizational change initiatives may exacerbate the negative consequences of continuous changes ultimately leading to burnout. Bruch and Menges (2010) argue that this lack of control over change interventions may have an adverse affect and ultimately “trap” organizations. Given the context of change and the need to consider how organizations can successfully manage both organizational change and burnout, this paper will now explore the nature of burnout and apply individual/job level burnout to an organizational level.

Towards a definition of burnout

Maslach and Jackson (1981) cited in Moreno-Jimenez and Villodres (2010) identify three core elements of burnout, namely emotional exhaustion (loss of energy, worn out and powerless), depersonalisation, or cynicism (negative attitude towards others, distancing and irritability) and low personal accomplishment /inefficacy (feelings of incompetence, low assertiveness, low self-esteem, ineffectiveness and cognition focussed on failure). Moreno-Jimenez and Villodres (2010:1801) define burnout as “a state of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion that may arise when a person is involved in situations of high emotional demand over a prolonged period”.

Maslach et. al. (2001) argue that in addition to job characteristics, there are organizational characteristics that affect burnout, such as the lack of social support and/or supervisor support. These authors consider the organizational and management environment in which work occurs, the importance of values implicit in organizational processes and structures, and how these values shape the emotional and cognitive relationship that people develop with their work. The organization is itself shaped by wider social, economic and cultural forces. Within Table 1, the author explores how many of the individual and job related aspects of burnout can be applied to the organizational level.

Whilst writers such as Bakker and Demerouti (2007) argue that the Job Demands Resources model accounts for burnout, what emphasis is there regarding organizational level issues, those which go way beyond the remit of the job?

Maslach’s approach	Implications for organizational level burnout (author’s comparabilities)
Predominance of symptoms like mental or emotional fatigue	Organizational malaise/inertia and organizational wide Survivor syndrome (often seen in Mergers and Acquisitions).
Emphasis upon mental and behavioural symptoms (not physical ones)	Carry out organizational health tests (ideally through independent measures and not only self-reporting techniques). This test should be subject to external scrutiny and transparency, provided that the appropriate ethical and moral checks are in place.
Burnout symptoms are work related	Organizational-wide related burnout symptoms
Symptoms exist in normal employees	Symptoms exist in ‘normal’ companies
Decreased effectiveness and work performance occur because of negative attitudes and behaviours	Performance changes across the whole, which may be linked to organizational culture or some other prevailing aspect(s).

Table 1: Five Common elements of Burnout (from Maslach et al 2001)

The organizational causes of burnout include excessive workload, a lack of autonomy and authority, insufficient reward and a growing disparity between personal and organizational values (Maslach and Leiter 1998, Schaufeli and Buunk, 1992). There may be a dissonance between expectations and reality. This could lead to a contagion of burnout. A combination of organizational factors, such as poor communication strategies and practices, lack of supportive mechanisms and an unforgiving organizational culture during change may all contribute to organizational burnout.

The concept of burnout may associate itself more readily with stressful occupations, such as nursing, teaching, fire and rescue, etc., and sometimes associated with individuals and personality types (e.g. Friedman's Type A and Type B personality). If we consider a definition of burnout hinging around emotional exhaustion resulting in the inability to carry out specific tasks or functions, then how can organizational burnout be defined? Is organizational burnout simply an expression of employee exhaustion? Whilst the bulk of the literature within psychology rests easily within individual and job-related burnout, how do we define organizational level of burnout?

Roberts (1997) identifies four measures of individual burnout – namely changes in behaviour, changes in feelings, changes in thinking and changes in health. All of these measures could be applied at organizational level, by measuring changes in organizational culture, changes in staff/employee engagement survey reported data, increased sickness/absence levels, changes in decision-making and working practices to mention a few.

The management challenge

Supposing that there are measures of burnout with a reasonable level of validity, what management actions could follow? Perhaps the biggest management challenge is being ignorant to signs of wide-scale burnout, and secondly, where within the organizational fabric is there a duty of care support system to help reduce/eliminate critical aspects of burnout? The role of Human Resource professionals within organisations is also something to explore within the research. Metz et al (2014) argue the need for “toxin handlers” (empathetic managers willing to try and address pain and suffering in organisations) working with the HR function in order to reduce burnout within the organization.

Denying that there is a cliff pending, let alone that we are peering over the burnout cliff and staring into an abyss is in itself a dangerous predisposition. Organizations need to set out to avoid burnout at all costs, as there is nothing overtly positive or useful about organizational burnout.

Future research into organizational burnout

A focus upon the extent to which the work environment and organizational change(s) impact collectively upon organizations needs to be considered. Burnout inventories, such as Maslach and the Copenhagen Burnout Inventories need to apply more to the organizational context rather than simply individual opinions of how happy or unhappy an individual feels at one point in time.

There is significant scope for both qualitative and quantitative type research to be undertaken within the field of burnout, particularly in trying to identify measures of organizational burnout. In order to provide reasonable explanations of why organizations suffer from burnout, a strong qualitative approach is required. Following this, an evaluation of these

measures is needed in order to ensure that a reasonable level of validity is achieved. Once measures of organizational level burnout are established, primary research can then be carried out in order to advance our understanding of this challenging and vital concern.