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Trainer burnout: Causes and Cures

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Abstract

Burnout among trainers is a pervasive problem that has received little attention. What is causing it? What can trainers do about it? This article discusses the lack of organizational support for training as a major source of stress leading to trainer burnout, ways to prevent trainer burnout, and ways to alleviate its debilitating effects.

Trainer Burnout: Causes and Cures

Are you a burned-out trainer? If you answered 'yes', you're not alone. In June of 1995, ASTD posed this question to the readers of *Training & Development* as part of their Fax Forum feature, and in September of that year they reported the results. Forty-three percent of those who responded to the poll said they felt they were burned out, and another 25% felt that they were "in danger" of burning out (ASTD, 1995). More recently, Waugh and Judd (2003) completed research using a valid and reliable instrument to measure burnout and found that a third of the training and development professionals surveyed can be classified as moderately to highly burned out. Clearly, burnout is a prevalent problem among trainers.

The term "burnout" conjures images of an extinguished flame. In symbolic terms, that is what characterizes the burnout syndrome. The internal fire that once was a source of energy no longer burns. Maslach (1982) defines burnout as a state of being emotionally exhausted, physically depleted, and mentally fatigued; feeling helpless, hopeless, and disillusioned. Those suffering from burnout frequently feel tired and lethargic. They find it difficult to invest themselves in their work as they once did. They often doubt their ability to continue being effective at their job, and may begin to seriously consider a new line of work.

Trainers are not alone in their suffering from burnout. Research has shown that this serious affliction, affects thousands of workers in a host of occupations such as nursing (Pick & Leiter, 1991), teaching (Farber, 1991), social work (Pines & Kafry, 1978), and mental health (Pines & Maslach, 1982). For the individual, the cost of burnout can be diminished mental and physical health (Belcastro, 1982; Belcastro & Hays, 1984;

Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Pierce & Malloy, 1990; Seidman & Zager, 1991), alcoholism

and drug abuse (Farber & Miller, 1981; Lowenstein, 1991; Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

For the organization, the costs include increased absenteeism and turnover, low morale,

and impaired professional performance (Farber, 1991; Jenkins & Calhoun, 1991;

Kierstead, 1983; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977; Litt & Turk, 1985; Needle, Griffin,

Svendsen & Berney, 1980).

What is causing trainers to burnout?

Research finds that prolonged exposure to stressful conditions in the workplace

often leads to burnout (Maslach, 1982; Pines & Aronson, 1988). Among the trainers who

responded to the 1995 poll, 83 percent named increases in workload as most stressful

(ASTD, 1995). Waugh and Judd (2003) report similar findings, stating that many of the

trainers they spoke to expressed experiencing stress as a result of an increase in their

workload. Statements such as "more work than time" and "the hectic pace" were

common. Indeed, as a recent report by ASTD on the *State of the Industry* indicates,

trainers are often being forced to do more training, often with fewer resources (Sugrue,

2003).

However, what has been learned from research is that while an increase in

workload is common and stressful, it is not the major source of burnout among trainers

(Waugh & Judd, 2003). Many trainers have experienced increases in their workload and

find it stressful. As one trainer stated, "Having a lot of work that needs to be done

yesterday is the nature of the job". But, greater workload demands alone often do not lead

to burnout. Waugh and Judd (2003) found that a greater source of frustration and stress

leading to trainer burnout is working in an organization that fails to value the importance

of training and the contribution trainers make to its functioning. Statements such as "trying to sell management on the benefits of training", "convincing upper management that training is essential", and "an inability to compel supervisors to follow the training plan" are cited most often by burned-out trainers as the most stressful aspects of their job.

Why does working in an organization that undervalues training and development initiatives frustrate and burn out so many trainers? In large part, the answer to this question lies in what motivated these professionals to enter the training and development field in the first place. According to Pines and Aronson (1988), individuals who enter a human service profession such as training and development are initially motivated to do so by the desire to work with people and to make significant contributions to the lives of those they serve. Indeed, Waugh and Judd (2003) found that the majority of trainers in their study population entered the training profession intrinsically motivated by the desire to help and improve the functioning of others. For trainers, improving worker performance is the primary inspiration for the training they deliver.

Unfortunately, though, some of these initially idealistic and exuberant newly-hired trainers find themselves battling an apathetic, unsupportive organization for the resources needed to conduct quality training and for validation that their work is valued and significant. In time, the idealism and exuberance they initially felt is replaced by frustration and disillusionment. The trainers become emotionally exhausted, lacking the energy to face another day. To cope, they may detach themselves psychologically and emotionally, depersonalizing those they serve as a means of distancing themselves from further stress-laden situations. Over time, these professionals may begin to harbor an attitude of cold indifference to the needs of others, which may ultimately lead to feelings

of incompetence and a sense of being unsuccessful in work-related achievement. In short,

trainers are able to withstand great amounts of work stress if they feel their work is

valued and appreciated by others. But, in the absence of feedback affirming that the work

they do is valued and significant, the stressors experienced day-to-day can overwhelm

and burn out the training professional (Waugh & Judd, 2003).

Preventing burnout

Obviously, the best way to prevent burnout is to seek employment in an

organization that will value and support the work completed. Unfortunately, these types

of organizations are not as plentiful as one would hope. It is common knowledge within

training and development circles that in many organizations the training department is

often the first to experience funding cutbacks and staff layoffs during lean times. As Jack

Phillips (1997) suggests, this is because top management in these organizations consider

training as a nonessential function. The attitude seems to be that the training department

offers little in the way of a bottom-line contribution to the organization. Therefore,

downsizing or eliminating the training department all together will have little negative

effect on the daily operation of the company.

Of course, not all organizations view training as a nonessential function. As

Phillips notes in his *Handbook of Training Evaluation and Measurement Methods* (3rd

ed.)(1997), "In some organizations, the status of the training and development function

has been enhanced enough in recent years that it has become an integral part of their

competitive strategies". (p. 23) Within these organizations, the management views

training as a necessary investment, and trainers are perceived as playing an indispensable

role within the organization.

A newly-minted trainer seeking employment, or a seasoned trainer making a move, should consider carefully before accepting a position with an organization whether training is a core element of their overall business strategy. Specifically, trainers should seek favorable answers to the following questions:

1.   What percentage of the organization's employees receives training in a year?

2.   On average, how much training do employees receive each year?

3.   How much money is spent on training each year?

As a frame of reference, the answers to these questions should be compared with the statistics reported in the *2003 ASTD State of the Industry Report* (Sugrue, 2003). For the year of 2002, those U. S. companies identified as Training Investment Leaders, i.e., companies who demonstrate a commitment to training, provided training to 94.4 percent of its eligible employees on average; employees received an average of 62.4 hours of training; and an average of 4.1 percent of their payroll was spent on training. Trainers seeking employment should pursue employment opportunities in organizations with figures comparable to these.

Coping with burnout

For those trainers who work in an unsupportive organization and suspect that they may be either on the verge of burning out or are already burned out from continually trying to "sell" top management on the value of training, there are several coping strategies to help reignite the internal flame.

Confront the source of stress and change it.

The most direct coping strategy is to eliminate the source of stress by garnering support from management for training initiatives. How? The trainer will need to establish

a firm justification for why the training is needed. The trainer must provide evidence that

certain knowledge and skills in vital areas of the organization are lacking among

employees; and that the training proposed will satisfy these needs and make the

employees more productive. The trainer must link training initiatives to the

organization's activities; and involve management in the development of a strategic

training plan that compliments those activities. Finally, the trainer must show evidence

that the training delivered is successful. A thorough evaluation that provides conclusive

evidence that the training participants mastered the content of the training, are applying

the training in their jobs, and that the investment in the training produced sizeable returns

will bolster continued support from top management.

Establish relationships with colleagues.

Trainers suffering from burnout often state that they feel isolated and alone in

their suffering. And, most are unaware and surprised to learn that there are many other

trainers who are suffering as well. To cope with daily frustrations and stress, trainers

should establish relationships with others within and outside their organization who can

identify with their circumstances; and who will actively listen and be understanding and

sympathetic.

Take a break

A vacation to an exotic, tropical island is a great way to reenergize. But, a week-

long vacation isn't the only solution. In fact, for those suffering from burnout, it may not

be the best solution. While a vacation will temporarily free the trainer from the confines

of a stressful work environment, what often awaits them upon their return is an

overwhelming amount of work to be completed that only adds to the stress. A better

solution is take shorter, daily breaks that provide an opportunity to rejuvenate the body, mind, and spirit. Simply taking a walk around the office building during lunch, getting involved in a sporting activity, or stopping work to read a few pages from a book by a favorite author can relieve stress. It really doesn't matter what activity the trainer chooses to engage in, as long as the activity frees his or her mind from thoughts of work.

Conclusion

Since Freudenberger's (1974) seminal study of the burnout phenomenon, an abundance of books, journal articles, and dissertations have been written on the subject. Much has been learned from research about the causes of burnout among teachers, nurses, social workers, and many others in human service occupations. And, while much of the findings from these studies shed light on the etiology of burnout in general, further studies specific to the training and development profession is needed to identify those causes germane trainers.

The suggestions offered in this article to prevent or cope with burnout are based, in large part, on the findings from the first and only known study of trainer burnout (Waugh & Judd, 2003). It is probable that causes of trainer burnout other than a lack of organizational support exist. Given the apparent prevalence of burnout among trainers, it is imperative that research continue so that undiscovered causes are identified and additional strategies to prevent or cope with burnout are developed.

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