

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

NAME IT TO TAME IT: RECOGNIZING AND MITIGATING BURNOUT

Nano Tools for Leaders® are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes — with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

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THE GOAL:

Recognize and reduce the physical and mental effects of burnout.

NANO TOOL:

Overwork and excessive stress seem so common they're hardly worth mentioning. Some executives even glorify their "busyness," touting it as a badge of honor. But the physical and emotional effects of burnout can cause lasting harm to individuals, and in the workplace, burnout results in higher rates of absenteeism, turnover, and poor performance.

Once considered a uniquely American problem (think longer workdays and non-standard paid vacation), burnout is now experienced by workers throughout the world. In China, Japan, and South Korea, there's even a specific word for death caused by overwork. Burnout was once thought to be limited to specific industries, such as health care and public safety. But in the Centers for Disease Control's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health publication *Stress at Work*, 40 percent of workers conveyed that their jobs are very stressful, and 26 percent said they are "often burned out or stressed" by their work. For executives, who typically have a higher threshold for stress and anxiety, burnout can be particularly insidious: most consider it a weakness or character flaw, are less likely to address it, and work even harder in response.

The first step in addressing burnout — and safeguarding physical and mental health and improving work outcomes — is acknowledging that you are experiencing it. Review the following list of symptoms; if you are experiencing more than three, consider the action steps below to begin to address them.

- Chronic fatigue, lack of energy, physical and/or emotional exhaustion
- Insomnia
- Forgetfulness and/or lack of focus or concentration
- Physical symptoms: chest pain or heart palpitations, shortness of breath, gastrointestinal pain, dizziness, fainting, headaches
- Increased immune-related issues including colds and flu
- Loss of appetite, weight loss
- Anxiety, depression, pessimism, tension, worry, lack of enjoyment



- Irritability, anger
- Detachment or isolation from others
- Poor performance or diminished productivity

ACTION STEPS:

Taking proactive steps to deal with burnout can be difficult, since fatigue and pessimism are characteristic symptoms. One must first become aware of negative self-talk, a part of distorted thinking that is a cardinal sign of emotional exhaustion. Examples of negative thoughts such as “nothing can take away the stress of my job” or “it won’t make a difference” can be observed rather than believed. Techniques to sidestep negative energy such as cognitive restructuring, mindfulness, and compassion can keep you centered even in the most turbulent of times. You can regard those trying moments as either bellwethers for future doom and gloom or opportunities for personal growth and transformation. Choose one or two of the following as a start to reducing and ultimately eliminating the threat of burnout.

- 1. Adopt a low-tech diet.** You can’t eliminate cell phone use, but you can cut back. Consider not tackling email as the first order of business. Instead, write a list of what you wish to accomplish that day and attend to those matters first. One important study showed that answering email just three times a day led to decreased stress and increased wellbeing.
- 2. Start (or restart) counseling.** “Talk therapy” can help you with cognitive restructuring: reframing problems and challenges in a new, more healthy and helpful way. You can work to let go of destructive habits and mindsets such as perfectionism, an unwillingness to forgive, and the constant need for control or approval — all of which can contribute to burnout.
- 3. Practice mindfulness.** Meditation and other mindful practices increase efficiency, focus, and clarity, and reduce stress. Check this [Nano Tool](#) for action steps and additional benefits.
- 4. Find meaning in your work.** By focusing on the good you and your company are doing, you can ease some of your job-related stress. This [Nano Tool](#) offers action steps to help you find greater meaning in your current role.
- 5. Focus on and prioritize your relationships.** Burnout may lead to feelings of detachment and isolation. For the next 30 days, commit to being the best spouse/partner/friend you can be. Expect nothing in return, then watch your sense of connectedness blossom. Recognize that the quality of relationships in large measure determines the quality of your life.
- 6. Work less to be more effective.** The benefits of “down time” and vacations are widely known, yet many executives skip these breaks in an effort to be more productive. This practice produces the opposite effect: diminished productivity due to greater stress and resultant burnout. This [Nano Tool](#) includes three action steps to help you work smarter even before you schedule some time off.

HOW COMPANIES USE IT:

While the steps above can help individuals combat burnout, these efforts are enhanced when a company’s leaders work to address excessive workplace stress.

- German companies such as Deutsche Telekom and Henkel have taken steps to prevent their employees from being “always available.” At Volkswagen, that means the company email server stops delivering messages 30 minutes after the work day ends and starts again 30 minutes before the start of the next work day. Weekends are completely email free. BMW has its employees work out agreements with their supervisors on the amount of work they perform on the road or from home.

- A number of investment banks limit the amount of time their employees can work on weekends. J.P. Morgan instituted a “protected weekends” policy, while at Bank of America Merrill Lynch junior bankers must take at least four weekend days off every calendar month. If they want to work more than four weekend days a month, they must get approval from senior managers. Goldman Sachs’s “Saturday Rule” states “All analysts and associates are required to be out of the office from 9 p.m. on Friday until 9 a.m. on Sunday.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *Employee Engagement Through Effective Performance Management: A Practical Guide for Managers*, Edward M. Mone and Manuel London (Routledge, 2017). Offers concrete examples, directions, checklists, and surveys to help managers increase engagement, which includes reducing or eliminating burnout.
- “Job demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: a multi-sample study,” Wilmar B. Schaufeli and Arnold B. Bakker (*Journal of Organizational Behavior*, March 2004). Concludes that burnout and engagement have different possible causes and consequences, which implies that different intervention strategies should be used for reducing burnout and enhancing engagement.

CITED IN THIS NANO TOOL:

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ABOUT NANO TOOLS:

Nano Tools for Leaders® was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, director of Custom Programs at Wharton Executive Education. *Nano Tools for Leaders®* is a collaboration between joint sponsors Wharton Executive Education and Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management. This collaboration is led by Professors Michael Useem and John Paul MacDuffie.