Work/Life

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Burnout in Academic Libraries

By Julia Huprich

What Is Burnout?

Burnout describes the process by which employees become disillusioned, frustrated and unproductive at the workplace due to high levels of stress. This condition has many sources and may be caused by personal issues as well as work-related problems. While problems at home or in their personal lives can affect an employee's ability to be productive at work, a manager cannot control these personal concerns. However, research has shown that administrators can implement programs to intervene in the burnout process and inspire their employees to reach their full potential and their utmost productivity level. An effective professional development program that focuses on successful orientation, participatory management and continued education can be very effective in preventing burnout.

Employee burnout is not a new idea; employees have been experiencing its effects since the organized workplace has existed. Psychologists had long tried to describe the process by which engaged, caring helpers became irritated, unproductive staff. Caputo reports that the phrase "burnout" was first used by Freudenberger in an article published in 1974 which introduced the term as summarizing "the unrelenting pursuit of impossible goals with insufficient resources [which] result[s] in the transformation of committed, caring professionals into exhausted, uncaring drones" (Caputo 1991, 3).

What Causes Burnout?

Employee burnout has many sources in the workplace. Merriam-Webster defines burnout as "exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration." Tedium, role conflicts or ambiguity, low pay and a lack of reward system are daily stresses that tend to grind down the employees of the world, resulting in a depressed, "fizzled-out" frame of mind. Burnout leads many to become bitter about their current situation, desire to leave their jobs or disengage from their work environment.

In addition to being susceptible to employee burnout because of the work environment, some groups are actually more vulnerable than others to the condition. New employees, especially those in a helping profession, are especially at risk. Cherniss reports that this is due to the "sharp discontinuity between the novice's expectations and the day-to-day reality of professional practice" (Cherniss 1980, 228). These new employees have yet to be affected by the "daily grind" and often still carry those idealistic goals that led them to choose a helping profession.

Researchers have determined many sources for burnout. Workplaces can be depressing, taxing environments with little opportunity for meaningful, positive experiences. Caputo identifies ten work-related causes of burnout: lack of professional autonomy, dealing with the public, role conflicts, role ambiguity, decreased opportunities for personal accomplishment, inadequate positive feedback, lack of

control over library operations, no-win situations, continuously heavy workload and stressors in the physical environment (Caputo 1991, 12-21). Administrators are in positions to positively affect their organizations to prevent the possibility of burnout and should take every advantage of developing caring, innovative employees. After all, the difference between a toxic work environment and a creative, productive organization is the quality of its employees.

What Does This Mean for Academic Libraries?

The academic library, despite being at the exciting center of research and student development, is not immune to employee burnout. In fact, academic librarians, paraprofessional staff and administrators are all susceptible to experiencing the effects of burnout because of the nature of academia, the stress of providing customer service to students and the pressures of promotion and tenure requirements. Caputo reports that librarians are susceptible to burnout for many reasons; budget cuts, frequent technological changes, low pay, few opportunities for advancement and censorship are all reasons librarians have cited for their stressful workplace (Caputo 1991, 62).

Each area of the academic library has its own stressors. The top ten sources of stress for public services librarians are patrons, workload, feelings of inadequacy, lack of positive feedback, non-reference duties, fragmentation, physical environment, scheduling, equipment problems and a lack of resources (Bunge 1987, 49). The fact that patrons are the main sources of stress is troubling for many new librarians. Academic libraries are service organizations and librarians are taught that they should focus on serving the students and catering to their needs. However, some students can be rude, ungrateful and demanding. New librarians can often be torn between a desire to serve their clients and an aversion to their behaviors. Cherniss details this dilemma, which is experienced by many in the service profession:

> For a new professional working in a public human service agency, clients are a major source of both gratification and strain. They can provide the new professional with the appreciation and confirmation that is sorely needed at this point in the career, but they can also criticize, complain, and question. When clients are motivated and responsive, they can facilitate the helping process and make work more stimulating and fulfilling for the professional. But when the client is resistant or apathetic, the professional's task becomes more difficult and there is a feeling of resentment that the client is not keeping his or her side of the "contract" (Cherniss 1980, 38).

In contrast to the public services librarians, technical services librarians report more dissatisfaction with their library peers. "Public services librarians are much more likely to report stress from a lack of understanding or appreciation on the campus or in the community, while technical services librarians are more likely to feel stressed by lack of appreciation within the library (especially from public services staff)" (Bunge 1987, 49). Technical services librarians serve their peers and provide the framework for the organization of the library by acquisitioning and cataloging materials. Despite their differences, both the public services librarians and the technical services librarians are both engaged in thankless, often tedious work.

What Can I Do to Prevent Burnout in My Academic Library?

Here are just a few ways that administrators can help to prevent burnout in their academic library:

1. *Have a properly developed new employee orientation program.* This helps all library faculty and staff members form a solid foundation in the workplace.

2. *Provide learning opportunities.* Keeping the minds of the library employees active can decrease the possibility that burnout will set in.

3. *Provide participatory management opportunities.* One of the key aspects of burnout is the feeling of powerlessness. Enabling employees to make decisions about their surroundings can help keep them engaged in the workplace.

4. *Provide a healthy opportunity to vent*. We all have our bad days, and having a designated time and place to release tension is one way to keep it from permeating the library. Have a series of couch sessions with a resident psychologist, plan a "vent party" where everyone shares their pet peeves—find some way that people can share their frustrations and learn possible solutions from others.

5. *Keep the workplace light and fun*. We all started working in a library for a reason—remind your faculty and staff why by planning activities that keep things interesting!

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Julia Huprich is Administrative Assistant to the Dean at the Georgia College & State University Library and Instructional Technology Center .

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