The
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Making a significant difference with burnout interventions: Researcher and practitioner collaboration

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Summary   Burnout research over the past 30 years has yielded both knowledge and tools to apply to interventions at unit and organizational levels. Examples of innovative partnerships between researchers and practitioners point to the importance of multi-level approaches in generating relevant and effective solutions to the burnout problem. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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Burnout became an issue of interest over 35 years ago when, quite independently, a practitioner (Freudenberger) and a researcher (Maslach) began to write about this previously unrecognized phenomenon. And it has now been 30 years since the publication in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* of the major research measure of burnout, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). From the beginning, there was a high degree of interest in "what can we actually <u>do</u> about burnout?"—in other words, how can any new knowledge gained through research be applied to the design of effective interventions? Conflicting pressures from the worlds of both academic research and workplace practice confronted the first burnout researchers. Practitioners were impatient with the slow pace of research and its "ivory tower" nature, but burnout research would get derogated within academia as "pop psychology," or as simply "old wine in new bottles," or as too applied rather than basic research.

Burnout research was exploratory at first, very bottom-up and anchored in people's experiences. Several themes emerged from this research on human service professions, including the key responses of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization to the overload of these demanding jobs, as well as a decline in one's sense of personal accomplishment. The development of a standardized measure of burnout was the necessary and significant next step to advance the research field. Two of us, Maslach and Jackson (1981), took on that psychometric challenge and developed the MBI, which assessed the three themes listed earlier. Its most recent version, the MBI-General Survey was developed for use in all occupations, not just human services, and the definitional terms of the three dimensions were expanded to exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996). The MBI has been translated into many languages and has been the leading measure to assess burnout in research around the world; for example, in Schaufeli and Enzmann's (1998) literature review, 90 per cent of the studies had used the MBI.

As we refined our theoretical framework for burnout, we conceptualized people's psychological relationship to their job as a continuum between the negative experience of burnout (exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy) and

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the positive experience of engagement (energy, involvement, and efficacy). This framework was consistent with response distributions on the MBI that reflected a smooth continuum of experience rather than a discrete condition of burnout. The practical significance of this burnout–engagement continuum is that engagement represents a desired goal for any burnout interventions. Such a framework leads people to consider what factors in the workplace are likely to enhance employees' energy, vigor, and resilience; to promote their involvement and absorption with the work tasks; and to ensure their dedication and sense of efficacy and success on the job.

Three decades of burnout research conducted at the individual level of analysis have resulted in a deeper understanding of how individual employees react to their jobs, in terms of job dissatisfaction, low organizational commitment, absenteeism, intention to leave the job, and turnover, as well as in their job performance (e.g., Aiken, Clarke, Sloane, Sochalski, & Silber, 2002; Wright & Bonett, 1997). As research developed, burnout scholars increasingly recognized that social and organizational conditions are primary correlates of burnout, particularly in six broad domains of job–person mismatch: work overload, lack of control, insufficient reward, breakdown of community, absence of fairness, and value conflict. Any or all of these areas may align well with employees' preferences or capacities, encouraging engagement, whereas poor alignments may aggravate burnout. To operationalize this conceptual framework, we developed the Areas of Worklife Scale (AWS) assessing the full continuum of job–person fit to misfit within these six domains (Leiter & Maslach, 2004).

So let us return to burnout's beginnings and the original plea to move quickly to test and develop possible solutions to this problem. Are we in a better position these days, with greater knowledge and better tools, to respond more effectively in terms of organizational interventions? We think we are. But we also think that a central incubating concept is to be more strategically pro-active about developing effective collaborations between researchers and practitioners. Our recent work illustrates how such partnerships can improve the experiences of employees while also contributing to organizational effectiveness.

Sharing Tools and Processes

Much of our recent research has been carried out with groups of workers within organizational settings, utilizing a collaborative, shared tools and process we have called an "organizational checkup." As a first step, we develop a customized organizational survey that is designed to produce a high level of employee response (70 per cent minimum). By combining our research measures with assessments of selected issues of concern to the specific organization, the process engages managers and increases their interest and cooperation (Leiter & Maslach, 2000). Subsequently, the aggregated survey results for the organization as a whole, and for its major units, are shared with all employees and become the basis for developing appropriate changes in the workplace. The combination of the AWS and the MBI in these surveys has proved to be valuable for organizational assessments, because it can depict what areas in the workplace are either problematic or sources of strength, as well as whether burnout is a significant issue in the organization and where. Moreover, longitudinal research using these two measures has shown that different patterns of scores at Time 1 can predict work unit and organizational outcomes a year later, including burnout rates (Maslach & Leiter, 2008) and work unit injury rates (Leiter & Maslach, 2009). Such findings demonstrate the practical usefulness of using the MBI and the AWS for organizational assessments to identify current symptoms, anticipate potential future problems, and then develop early preventive interventions.

Although we originally developed the organizational checkup process to ensure high quality samples for our research, we have found that it can become a valuable, ongoing self-assessment process for organizations. For example, one of the first organizations to collaborate with us has continued to use this process annually, for their own improvement, for over 10 years. Some of their interventions involved redesigning staff recognition programs and making them fairer, whereas others focused on improving community issues, such as internal communications and leadership training for new supervisors. The lesson here is that the methods and tools developed for research may have a second, practical use within the workplace—and we would recommend that researchers could provide

a valuable social function by actively collaborating with practitioners to achieve these additional benefits. This is a different form of "applied" research, and its value should be recognized, and encouraged, within the academy.

Using a Unit Level of Analysis for Intervention

For years, we have heard repeated calls for scholarship that has more apparent relevance to the everyday work of practicing managers. The field of organizational behavior has no singular answer to how best to achieve the desired degree of "relevance" in our research, but addressing phenomena at higher levels of analysis is one possible strategy. Organizations are designed and managed around work units. Usually, managers are held accountable for large groups of employees, not only individuals. When their performance as managers is evaluated, the measures are typically aggregated indicators, such as productivity, turnover rates, and work unit engagement. In organizations where burnout is a potential issue, interventions to prevent or ameliorate it are often designed for, and implemented across, entire departments or business units. Decisions about how to monitor and manage burnout are often made in the context of the needs of an entire organization—or at least numerous units within the organization. Thus, the relevance of future research on burnout may grow to the extent that it is conceptualized and conducted with the objective of drawing implications and conclusions that apply to managing work units.

Prior research on burnout provides strategic directions for collaboration at these unit levels. First, the strategy for organizational intervention is to change qualities of the work environment with strong links to enhanced employee engagement. The diverse range of burnout's organizational precursors in the six domains of the AWS presents many potential intervention targets. For example, a mismatch on the community area of work–life may suggest work on team building or civility, whereas a mismatch on fairness may suggest increasing transparency of decision making. The challenge is then to identify leverage points at which a feasible investment of resources would produce a meaningful improvement in employees' connection with their work.

An innovative example of this approach is a project on civility among coworkers. Research has found that coworker and supervisor relationships have strong links with burnout (e.g., Leiter & Maslach, 1988), but clearer evidence about the social mechanisms was only recently suggested by research on the negative impact of coworker incivility (Pearson & Porath, 2009). Incivility is characterized by a lack of consideration and by demonstrations of disrespect of ambiguous intent, as specified in the Workplace Incivility Scale, for example, "Ignored or excluded you from professional camaraderie" (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001, p. 70). Because of its milder nature and greater frequency, incivility provides different research or an intervention focus than relatively rare instances of abuse or aggression.

A structured process, CREW (Civility, Respect, and Engagement at Work; Osatuke, Mohr, Ward, Moore, Dyrenforth, & Belton, 2009), has been demonstrated to improve civility among coworkers; these results suggested that improved civility would in turn affect employee burnout. The approach builds upon clear principles of respectful working relationships while using a loose structure that allows workgroups to adapt the process to their specific challenges and their local values. CREW seeks to infuse qualities of civility into workgroups' preferred style of interacting. Qualities of civility include being attentive to colleagues, listening to their views and concerns, accommodating one another's preferences, and anticipating the impact of one's behavior on others.

The CREW process occurs through local facilitators who lead regular sessions of workgroup members over a six-month period. Guided by a toolkit of group exercises and discussion topics, the group reflects upon their usual mode of interacting and explores alternatives. After role playing new ways of responding to colleagues, participants try out new social behaviors during their workdays, reflecting on these experiences in subsequent CREW sessions.

Using a waiting list control design, Leiter, Laschinger, Day and Gilin-Oore (2011) demonstrated that CREW not only improved civility (replicating the Osatuke et al., 2009 findings) but that improvements in civility also mediated improvements in the cynicism dimension of burnout, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and management trust. This analysis provided support for the assertion that improving working relationships plays an important role in alleviating burnout.

The research design for this project had several features of a successful collaboration of researchers and practitioners. First, the problem—workplace incivility—was identified in conversations between researchers and organizational leaders as both an urgent issue needing solutions and a topic with a rich potential to contribute to knowledge. Second, the participating organizations played a major role in the intervention, in that the facilitators were ongoing employees who developed the capacity to facilitate CREW sessions. This quality gave the knowledge to the organizations to help them address future challenges in workplace relationships. Third, each party made essential contributions to the project. The organizations contributed the opportunity and facilitators; the researchers contributed high-quality measurement that critically evaluated CREW's impact.

Focusing on Multi-Level Effects

Scholarship within the broad field of organizational behavior has rapidly expanded to consider phenomena at multiple levels of analysis. By bringing a multi-level lens to investigations of organizational behavior, the field is beginning to develop deeper understandings of the complex intertwining of individual and social phenomena. Looking ahead, we envision more multi-level approaches in future research on burnout as well.

More than 30 years have passed since Roberts, Hulin, and Rousseau (1978) laid out a framework for integrating organizational scholarship grounded in "micro" and "macro" approaches. Multi-level models such as those recognize that individuals are embedded in nested organizational entities. Employees often work closely with members of a small work team, which resides in a larger business unit, which is embedded in an organization that spans multiple geographic boundaries (e.g., districts, states, provinces, and countries).

Earlier research conducted at the individual level of analysis suggested the important role such social systems play in the unfolding of burnout phenomena. With recent methodological and statistical advances, many practical barriers to conducting research that matches the rich multi-level reality of organizational life have been removed. Multi-level research promises to stimulate both new conceptual thinking and the development of knowledge that can be put to practical use to reduce burnout in organizations. For example, separating the individual and workgroup dynamics of exhaustion would provide direction for developing distinct interventions that focus on improving management practices at the team level or workplace health practices at the individual level. Greater understanding of the distinct social dynamics of organizational units has the potential to help sustain gains from organizational interventions. Activities and policies that fit the local context are more likely to establish self-perpetuating cycles of actions and responses that maintain constructive change.

Burnout has a future. By anchoring a continuum of personal experiences, the burnout construct has provided a foundation for continuing explorations of psychological connections of people with their work from both positive and negative perspectives. We have touched upon the potential of these ideas for incubating new insights regarding the social context of psychological relationships with work.

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