Executive Burnout Essay, Research Paper

Executive Burnout and it’s Causes

Definition: According to New York Psychologist Herbert J. Freudenberger, PhD., who coined the term, burned is a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by a devotion to a cause, a way of life, or a relationship that failed to produce the expected reward.

Burnout is a problem born of good intentions, because it happens when people try to reach unrealistic goals and end up depleting their energy and losing touch with themselves and others.

Symptoms: The onset is slow. The early symptoms include a feeling of emotional and physical exhaustion; a sense of alienation, cynicism, impatience, negativism and feelings of detachment to the point that the individual begins to resent work involved and the people who are a part of that work. In extreme cases the individual who once cared very much about a project or a group will insulate themselves to the point the they no longer care at all.

The irony of burnout is that it happens to the same person who previously was enthusiastic and brimming over with energy and new ideas when first involved in a job or a new situation. This type of person generally has a very high expectation of what can be accomplished. As time goes by and all of the goals aren’t achieved, the enthusiasm diminishes and listlessness sets in. Instead of lowering objectives or accepting reality, frustration is bottled up and the individual tries even harder. The result is burnout.

The four Phases of Stress reactions that lead to burnout:

1. Warning signs: The warning signs are emotional in nature, and are feelings of vague anxiety, fatigue, depression, and boredom with one’s job and apathy.

2. Mild symptoms: If an executive ignores theses warning signals, they will intensify. Some physical signs are added to the emotional ones: reduced emotional control, increasing anxiety, sleep disturbances, headaches, diffuse back and muscle aches, loss of energy, hyper-activity, excessive fatigue, moderate social withdraw, and nausea.

3. Entrenched symptoms: An executive who allows a prolonged stress reaction will suffer some painful conditions. Career, family life and personal happiness are all on the line, and immediate help is essential. Signs include skin rashes, physical weakness, and strong feelings of depression. increased alcohol intake, high blood pressure, migraine headaches, loss of appetite, loss of sexual appetite, ulcers, social withdrawal, excessive irritability, emotional outbursts, development of irrational fears, and inflexibility in thought.

4. Debilitating symptoms: If an executive survives this destructive phase, they are rarely able to continue working in the same field. Careers end prematurely, as do lives. Sufferers are usually sick, both emotionally and physically. Symptoms include: asthma, coronary artery disease, diabetes, cancer, heart attacks, severe depression, lowered self-esteem, inability to function, severe withdrawal, uncontrolled crying spells, suicidal thoughts, muscle tremors, severe fatigue, overreaction, agitation, constant tension, frequent accidents, carelessness, feelings of hostility, and thought disorders.

In the 90’s, the insecurity of executives has risen to a crescendo. With middle management jobs disappearing completely in some companies, job stability has never seemed less assured. An uncertain, turbulent environment where executives often find their compassion and humanity in conflict with the pressures of competition and ambition. Corporations are involved in a continual change process that creates heightened anxiety.

The focus is on velocity to generate revenue, reduce cost, improve efficiency, and enhance employee and customer satisfaction. Most executives prefer to be seen as agents of change, but many are branded as corporate assassins with ice water in their veins and a calculator for a heart. They feel pressured, as sales and production quotas climb, but budgets, salaries, travel allowances, expense accounts, and opportunities for promotion dwindle. Executives are at the end of an electronic leash, compelled to carry a beeper and cellular phone and check their voice mail and e-mail messages often to remain in constant touch. Corporations do not understand the human aspects of restructuring as they do finance and technology.

It is increasingly common for an executive not to have a “life”; genuinely free time represents just 6% of a typical high-ranking executive’s working week. Work, thinking about work and commuting to work accounts for 53% as the chart shows. They spend 11% sleeping and 30% on day to day chores.

A typical executive’s week leaves little free time as the following graph shows:

Part of the problem today is that people expect to be overworked. There is an acceptance that we will be tired and a bit burnt out. It perpetuates the problem.

Tips for helping to relieve stress:

1. Time Management: It is important to have balance in one’s life: balance between work and play; between adult social time and alone time; between family time, physical activity. Assess priorities; make time for each category. Look at how priorities are established. A person need to turn have-to’s into want-to’s.

2. Attitude: How a person thinks can have a profound affect on one’s emotional and physical well-being. Each time a negative thought about something the body reacts as if it were in the throes of a tension filled situation. Think good things switch negative self-statements to positive statements.

3. Relaxation, Meditation, Guided Imagery: Physiologically relaxing the body brings down the heart rate, blood pressure and slows breathing. These are all manifestations of stress release in the body. Work up to at least once per day (20-30 minutes) to center ones self with meditation, relaxation exercises, or guided imagery tapes.

4. Exercise: Bodies are designed to move. Built up stress can be difficult by physical activity. Walk will help if you can’t do anything else. Aerobic activity, on a regular basis, plays a significant role in boosting the immune system. Work up to incorporating some form of physical exercise three times per week.

5. Fun and Laughter: There is a measured effect of the relaxation response after a good laugh. Laughing reduces stress. Do something playful at least once per week, if not once per day.

Companies are now facing a painful reality that the future has to change. Companies have to learn to recognize when they are driving their employees too hard and when they are depleting their inner resources. Executives in the future must learn to lose a little bit oft the luster and be willing to shed their super hero image.

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