

EDITORIAL

Strengthening positive interpersonal relationships at work: An antidote for burnout

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Introduction

Burnout is an important phenomenon for organizations and employees associated with negative outcomes. Key organizational areas, like fairness and workplace community, are responsible for employee burnout. This editorial argues for the importance of workplace community and presents the mechanisms through which dysfunctional relationships at work may contribute to burnout, as well as the processes that explain how healthy interpersonal relationships can be an antidote for burnout.

The perils of burnout

For over forty decades researchers and practitioners have been studying and debating burnout causes and effects, with the purpose of building better workplaces with engaged employees. Burnout is a reaction to persistent stress at work and is characterized by emotional exhaustion (i.e., the feeling of being used up and unable to unwind and recuperate), cynicism (i.e., the experience of disinterest and a negative or indifferent approach towards others and the workplace) and professional inefficacy (i.e., a feeling of work-related dissatisfaction and of being inadequate) (Watts & Robertson, 2011; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Moreover, burnout symptoms may be transferred among colleagues (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003). Essentially, burnout results from a lasting imbalance between

job demands and job resources, inconsistencies in key work areas (such as interpersonal relationships or workload) and can also occur when employees notice a discrepancy between the organization's intentions and reality (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Emotional exhaustion is usually the first reaction to the stress of job demands; cynicism can be seen as a way an individual copes with various aspects of the job – as a result, feelings of self-doubt develop and the employee feels less effective in achieving his/her own goals (Jackson & Schuler, 1983; Peeters & Le Blanc, 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). From a financial perspective, burned-out employees can cost organizations up to billions of dollars due to people becoming ill and losing work days, performing at lower levels and leaving the organizations they work in (Leiter & Maslach, 2005).

This editorial focuses on the issue of interpersonal relationships at work and provides arguments for the essential role played by quality social interactions at work, as the workplace community is considered to be one of the key elements in burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Moreover, the topic of interpersonal relationships at work is an essential one, as organizations depend on individuals interacting and working together to carry out work tasks (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003).

Workplace community: a key element for employee well-being

Individuals spend a significant amount of time at work – here, they aim at accomplishing goals relevant to the organization and to their own professional development. Organizations strive for high performance and effectiveness, and therefore, rendering the adequate work characteristics, fostering meaningful work and attending to employees' well-being significantly contribute to reaching such goals. This is only possible when people are synchronous with the fundamental areas of their jobs (i.e., workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values) – when the opposite happens, burnout occurs (Leiter & Maslach, 2005). The community and the quality of its inner relationships are crucial to organizational functioning. Since working in teams is a common way of organizing work, good interpersonal communication enables work processes and social support is a valuable resource relevant for positive outcomes which also protects individuals from the potentially harmful effects of demands. When relationships at work are impaired and employees experience conflicts, become targets of mistreatment, or experience inadequate communication, the risk of burnout arises. Hence, below I emphasize what I believe to be relevant mechanisms for explaining the story behind the powerful connection between interpersonal relationships at work and burnout.

The need to connect with other people and to experience a sense of togetherness – relatedness – is one of the three fundamental needs people have, along with autonomy and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Frustration of fundamental needs is related to states of ill-being and poor functioning such as burnout (Fernet, Gagné, & Austin, 2010; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Research in the field argues that burnout develops mainly in a social environment and that lack of support, incivility and conflicts are important correlates (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Buunk & Schaufeli, 1993; Leiter & Maslach, 1988). When interpersonal

relationships at work are inadequate, in time, people may become more susceptible to burnout (Fernet et al., 2010), because they emotionally charge employees and antagonize them. Recent studies showed that being a target of mistreatment at work is associated with higher burnout (Sulea, Filipescu, Horga, Ortan, & Fischmann, 2012) and less work engagement (Sulea, Fischmann, & Filipescu, 2012).

Conversely, positive social relationships may prevent and reduce burnout because civility among colleagues fosters and attracts further resources, such as emotional support from others at work or their knowledge and skills (Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Oore, 2011; Halbesleben, 2006). Additionally, positive exchanges between colleagues are associated with higher work performance, satisfaction and organizational commitment (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Within this context it is worth noting that a recent meta-analysis showed that the development of interpersonal skills is relevant for employee feelings of personal efficacy (Maricutoiu, Sava, & Butta, 2014).

Interpersonal relationships at work – burnout: how does it work?

How can we explain the mechanisms through which poor workplace relationships deplete individuals, renders them more indifferent and less confident in their efficacy at work? A relevant theoretical frame is the perspective of Conservation of Resources (COR), a theory with an emphasis on resources defined as „objects, personal characteristics, conditions or energies that are valued in their own right or that are valued because they act as conduits to the achievement or protection of valued resources” (Hobföll, 2001, p.339). The COR theory highlights the relevance of positive connections and the individuals' concern with fostering current resources and acquiring new ones (Halbesleben, 2012). An important resource is social support which also contributes to maintaining a strong pool of resources

(Hobföll, 2001). Generally, social support refers to emotional experiences of feeling valued and being cared for, to information received and also to material help, all being relevant for coping with stress within organization (Cohen & Pressman, 2004). Within the COR perspective, people are motivated to invest resources because they can get more resources or different ones. For example, colleagues who offer instrumental support, such as helping others complete a task or teaching them how to carry out a task in a different manner might benefit later from a future collaboration when working with better prepared colleagues, and, therefore, working more efficiently. Basically, a good workplace community is an essential resource and may prevent burnout because it helps individuals reframe potentially harmful situations so that they are not appraised as highly stressful, it contributes to strengthening abilities relevant to coping with demands, and also because social support may prevent inadequate reactions by attenuating strong emotions (e.g., Cohen & Pressman, 2004). Moreover, quality interpersonal relationships at work contribute to experiencing a meaningful work activity, by sharing the same values with colleagues.. Significantly, people may tolerate a greater workload if they value the work and feel they are doing something important, and if they feel well-rewarded for their efforts (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

The quality of interpersonal relationships at work: an essential feature for employee well-being

High-quality connections are relationships in which individuals feel safe to display various emotions they feel, which show flexibility to adapt to various circumstances and which are open to new ideas, and due to their contribution to the subjective experience of vitality and enhanced self-esteem they might counteract burnout (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Moreover, quality connections fulfill the individual need of relatedness. Therefore,

people feel that they are part of the group, they can talk with others about issues that are relevant to them and develop friendship relationships. They feel valued as individuals and feel that their opinion is heard, which is important for the meaning that people derive from their work. In a healthy and authentic relational environment people grow, are more self-confident and build better knowledge due to good communication and learning processes. For example, recent study showed that when people experience fairness and respect in interpersonal relationships at work, they are more work engaged and more inclined to stay with their organization (Sulea, Fischmann, & Ispas, 2014). Also social support at work is related to low burnout, especially low exhaustion (Halbesleben, 2006). Specifically, high quality supervisory relationships imply providing various types of resources encourage voice and innovation, foster cooperation and reciprocity, therefore contributing to the individual fundamental need to belong, and to building self-efficacy (Bono & Yoon, 2012). Support from the supervisor appears to be consistently associated with low exhaustion, whereas coworker support is more rather associated with employee efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2008) and with less cynical attitude towards others at work (Peeters & Le Blanc, 2001). In addition, when employees enjoy their work and have quality relationships with their colleagues, they tend exhibit less burnout symptoms over time (Fernet, Gagné, & Austin, 2010). In sum, quality interpersonal relationships at work are relevant to fostering positive energy and work collaboration and to creating a work environment that enables trust, learning and development.

Dealing with problematic interpersonal relationships at work

Without a doubt, relationships with individuals at work are essential to a satisfactory working life. When support is lacking and interpersonal relationships are

problematic, action is needed. Following Leiter and Maslach's approach (2005), some important matters are discussed below. The first step in solving problems is defining the problem. If the area of interpersonal relationships was signaled as dysfunctional, there is the need to define the specific issues (e.g., insufficient support, hostile interpersonal behaviors or interpersonal conflicts). The following steps involve setting objectives (e.g., dealing with relevant conflicts or improving communication); taking action (e.g., focusing on common goals when solving a conflict, encouraging civility at work and emphasizing its benefits; expressing support by celebrating success, empathizing with frustrations; modeling positive actions and welcoming new employees) and tracking progress. The authors stress the importance of building alliances, anticipating resistance to change and assessing risks. One specific intervention that was found to be successful is CREW (Civility, Respect and Engagement in the Workplace), which is a process aimed at enhancing civility among people at work where managers explicitly promote civility as a core value of the organization and program facilitators organize with employees reflections on their own acts of civility and incivility and discussions on other relevant topics such as accountability (e.g., Leiter et al., 2011).

Perhaps the issue of building healthy workplace communities is more challenging in our country, considering our extended experience with imposed collectivistic approaches and limited autonomy. Unfortunately, the recent history and current context have created a culture where we are constantly exposed to unfairness, incompetence in key positions and expressions of hostility. These remarks do not invite to using the "heavy legacy" as an excuse for behave badly nor for tolerating dysfunctional behaviors because "this is life". Rather they point to the acknowledgement of a wider context which influences organizational life and the importance of bringing about change in a realistic manner. Taking actions involve a degree of risk, but so does involve doing nothing. It is important to keep in mind that

some people certainly will think alike and be willing to engage in building healthy and functional alliances to promote change. Dealing with dysfunctional relationships at work means sometimes organizing a program and sometimes it is about directly addressing disrespectful situations or insisting on clear procedures. But engagement in the work community is not just about fixing problems. It is also about understanding the benefits of respectful interactions and making time to take interest in one another, to celebrate success and show that we care.

Discussion and future directions

The current perspective emphasizes that burnout is an organizational problem and companies should pay attention to problematic work-related areas and develop appropriate interventions. From the research perspective, the role of burnout antecedents from the interpersonal area at work is rather clear, which is relevant to preventive actions, but the perspective on burnout intervention still needs more evidence. Even if some individual-based interventions are proven to be effective for some burnout dimensions (e.g., interventions based on relaxation and development of role-related skills may decrease emotional exhaustion; Maricutoiu et al., 2014) there is still a great need to conduct more rigorous studies on interventions. Burnout is mainly an organizational problem, therefore research should focus more on testing interventions at the organizational level which require changes of procedures, demands and resources. The concept of social support should be clearly operationalized in order to identify specific attitudes and behaviors that are relevant in a specific organization or work context. Furthermore, longitudinal studies with multiple measurements are highly needed, in order to find out the specific dynamics and potential reciprocal effects between interpersonal aspects at work and burnout dimensions. Importantly, as interpersonal demands differ in various professions (e.g., a pupil misbehaving in a study class versus an angry customer or a depressed noncompliant patient), studies

focused on specific professions might bring more relevant solutions.

From the practical perspective, several models and instruments can help identify essential areas responsible for employee well-being and performance (e.g., JD-R monitor, Schaufeli & Taris, 2014; Short inventory to monitor psychosocial hazards; Notelaers, De Witte, Van Veldhoven, & Vermunt, 2007, My relationship with work test, Leiter & Maslach, 2005). These approaches are relevant because they provide a complex picture of organizational issues, therefore identifying the existing problems and resources, and also their relevance in a particular organization. Significantly, consultants need to use proper instruments for diagnosis, get managerial support and aim at realistic objectives for any intervention.

Final thoughts

A good workplace community enables work and provides resource-rich environment for employees. Improving ways of communication and of relating to one another strengthens the community. This does not mean that people at work need to be best friends or resemble a family. This is neither the point nor the aim. It means that at work individuals need to be treated with respect, fairness and support so they can develop and maintain resources and shape a meaning relevant to employee well-being and positive organizational outcomes. How can we put these ideas into practice and make them work at the organizational level? Perhaps the first step is to raise awareness at the organizational level. Burnout is not just being tired, it's being drained out and callous and inefficient at work – which is exactly the opposite of what managers and employees want. To properly build a healthy workplace community, organizations need to employ an evidence-based practice and promote feasible interventions. Essentially, consultants can play an important role in arguing for prevention – as a more effective and less costly means of solution than intervention after the problem has arisen and related negative consequences.

The thoughts and comments presented in this editorial are aimed to draw attention and emphasize the serious problem of burnout, considering that in Romania the legislative and organizational perspectives on burnout are still unsatisfactory and consistent actions for building healthy workplaces are still scarce. Despite these limitations, the road to interventions is open, considering that organizations are accustomed to programs aimed at building better teams or developing interpersonal skills. At the managerial level, an important objective is to build a more comprehensive vision on burnout prevention and intervention by engaging in a proper diagnosis for identifying problem areas and by developing interventions supported by key actors. This goal will have better chances to be on the managers' agenda if there are more well-trained organizational consultants and HR specialists to get managers' support and engagement on occupational health actions.

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