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### **Preventing Burnout: Taking the Stress Out of the Job**

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#### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this article and of the workshop on this subject presented at the 1989 International Conference on Volunteer Administration is to inform Directors of Volunteers of a new approach to burnout prevention which can directly impact occurrences among themselves and their co-workers. We in volunteer administration are not immune; our burnout rates average 3 1/2 years. This situation, left unchecked, poses a threat to the long term effectiveness of our organizations.*

**(Editor -generated) Key Words:** burnout, volunteer managers

Burnout is taking a toll on an increasing number of people and is one of the most challenging issues confronting organizations today. Traditionally, most approaches to burnout prevention come from an individual perspective that teaches stress reduction, time management, relaxation exercises and various other coping skills. This is the "blame the victim" approach which supports the notion that preventing burnout is purely the responsibility of the individual worker (staff or volunteer). These techniques and strategies are needed and important, but if we stop there, we are looking at only part of the problem and thus only part of the solution. We need to look beyond the individual for the causes of and solutions to burnout.

A newer and wider approach to burnout, supported by the work of social psychologists Christine Maslach and Ayala Pines, is utilized today. This new approach examines the ways in which organizations

contribute to burnout and seeks to bring the organization into partnership with the individual worker in dealing with it, "Rather than indentifying 'bad people' as the cause, we need to be looking at the 'bad situations' in which good people function" (Maslach, 1982).

Research supports the fact that organizational characteristics play a larger role in burnout than individual vulnerabilities (Pines, 1982). While it may be quicker and easier for individual to learn coping techniques, making improvements in the workplace has a far more pervasive and longer lasting impact on burnout rates. It is far more effective to try to change the organization in order to create a less stressful, more productive environment for all. Why not take the stress out of the job?

#### **What is Burnout?**

When asked to define burnout, the response given most often by people is, "I know it when I feel it." Maslach defines

burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among those who do "people work" of some kind. She sees it as a response to the chronic emotional strain of dealing extensively with other people, especially when they are having problems or are in trouble (Maslach, 1982).

Burnout has also been characterized as a withdrawal of energy resulting from the fatigue and frustration brought about by dedication to a job, a cause, a way of life, or even a relationship which ceases to bring the expected rewards. This is being "OVER" -- over-loaded, over-whelmed, over-involved and over-extended by the emotional demands of others. Too much energy is going out, and not enough is coming back in. As a result, there is a breakdown caused over time by daily struggles and / or chronic stress. It is not so much that the situation changes, it is more that one's ability to cope with and tolerate the situation changes.

The definition of burnout spells trouble for volunteer programs and becomes a major contributor to turnover among Directors of Volunteers and volunteers alike. The large amount of "people work" in the field makes burnout a common occupational hazard.

In recognizing burnout, it is important to remember that a certain amount of stress in an organization is healthy and can actually be helpful. A level of stress and pressure can be important factors in creating effectiveness, excitement and achievement. However, there is a line for each person and organization beyond which a challenge becomes a burden, and excitement becomes fear. The key is that one environment is not for everyone and the task for each person and organization is to discover the optimal level.

### **Effects on the Organization**

It is essential that organizations acknowledge their parts in burnout, and there is growing interest among them to better understand and more effectively combat it. This newborn interest comes as the result of realizing that the organization is as affected by burnout as the workers within the organization. Effects of burnout on the organizations, as reported by workshop participants, manifest themselves through low morale, poor performance, high absenteeism, high turnover, accidents, poor relationships and increased health care utilization. These effects directly impact the healthy functioning of an organization by disrupting the continuity of work. This results in on-going staff and volunteer training, high health care and training costs, lost days at work and negative client/consumer care. Consequent reactions from the community can damage the reputation and credibility of the organization itself.

It is easy to see that recognizing burnout as a legitimate organizational problem is in the best interest of all and needs to be dealt with on the level. "Imagine investigating the personality of cucumbers to discover why they had turned into sour pickles without analyzing the vinegar barrel in which they'd been submerged" (Maslach, 1982).

### **Organizational Variables**

Workers are quick to blame themselves for inadequacies rather than looking to features in the organization and the job which promote burnout. Such a focus allows for the possibility that the "Nature of the Job" may precipitate burnout, not just the "Nature of the Person" doing the job (Maslach, 1982). Rather than looking for defective people, one focuses on the situation people are in. What sort of tasks

do they do and why? In what settings do activities take place? What limits or constraints exist? What rules, regulations, standard operating procedures, management styles and levels of support are there?

Four variables in the organizational environment have been identified as important components in promoting or preventing burnout (Pines, 1982).

#### *Psychological Component*

Included are features that can be both emotional and cognitive in nature:

- Emotional  
The worker's sense of significance and self-actualization in the workplace. Are the goals those which workers can relate to? What levels of creativity and initiative are provided? What opportunities for growth are there? What is the worker's sense of acceptance? How does it feel to work there?
- Cognitive  
What is the variety and frequency of overload and is the burden more than the person's ability to handle it? What demands are made on the workers? What is the sense of accomplishment, power and control over the work? Is there a level of boredom?

#### *Physical Component*

Included are fixed features such as space, architectural structure, noise, lighting, crowding, ventilation, phones and privacy.

What amount of flexibility is there to change those features to make them more suited to individual taste, comfort and efficiency?

#### *Social Component*

Included are all of the people coming in direct contact with the individual worker:

- Clients  
The number and severity of their problems.
- Co-workers

The quality of work relationships and personal relationships. The level of support, relief, work share, trust and fun available.

- Volunteers  
The number of volunteers. The intensity of the job, personal and work relationships, emotional needs, support, problems and available resources.
- Supervisor/Administrators  
What is the quality of feedback, support and challenge provided? What resources are available? Level of trust, accessibility and management style?

#### *Organizational Component*

Included bureaucratic hassles like red tape, paperwork, rules, regulations, communication patterns, decision-making, the role of the individual in the organization, back up, autonomy and control of the work.

#### **Organizational assessment**

These organizational variants become the basis for individual worker's assessment of the work environment to see where each experiences stress in the job. Attention can then be focused on the most stressful aspects of the job and the workplace in general. Once those aspects of the job which contribute to burnout are identified, they can be dealt with effectively.

The guiding rule is to "change what you can and support what you can't." A useful strategy at this point is to have workers brainstorm possible remedies to common stressors, including all ideas whether feasible or not. Out of this process many alternatives will arise from which to choose. Creativity, ownership and fun can flourish here. When this process was implemented at the workshop, some of the alternatives generated were: job redesign, improved and/or additional training, role clarification, different patterns of work division, job rotation, support teams,

improved supervisory feedback, more staff, more effective and new involvement of volunteers, sports teams, parties, maximized ratio of staff to clients, feelings meetings, rearranged workspace, flexible leave time, changed organizational policy, redesigned forms, soundproofed space and redesigned phone systems. It is from this list of alternatives that realistic, feasible and affordable remedies can be chosen and then implemented to impact burnout in the organization.

### **Volunteer Program and Burnout**

One advantage to involving volunteers is that their time commitment is usually less than that of staff so they may be less prone to burnout. Volunteers can have a positive effect on staff burnout rates by helping to offset the workload through sharing responsibilities and by taking over during needed “times out”. Volunteers bring to the organization fresh ideas, energy and new perspectives which can revitalize staff. This can counter the danger of staff burnout “rubbing off” on volunteers. Good staff and volunteer relations can be created by this interplay which offers support to both groups.

The downside is that volunteers are just as susceptible to burnout as staff, although it may take them longer to get there. The same features in the organization that promote burnout in staff can have similar effects on volunteers. The enthusiasm and zeal volunteers bring to their work, combined with demands and conditions in the organization, can set volunteers up to experience burnout. Teaching volunteers about burnout—how to set and respect limits and how to say NO—needs to become an integral part of the initial training. Including volunteers in the organizational burnout assessment process is highly recommended.

Directors of volunteers are highly susceptible to burnout because of their unique positions in most organization. Balancing the needs and demands of volunteers along with those of staff can put directors of volunteers in stressful situations which, over time, can contribute to burnout. Working with large groups and a wide variety of people; dealing with negative attitudes about volunteers, sudden resignations, and lack of follow-through; and supporting the emotional needs of their volunteers only scratch the surface of the particular stresses directors of volunteers face every day. A healthy work environment for all is the goal.

### **Prevention Strategy**

Even with the best of efforts from all concerned, most staff and volunteers will feel discouraged from time to time. This is the natural ebb and flow of “people” work. The key to preventing burnout is the response of both the organization and the individual and the timeliness at which it is caught. An ounce of prevention equals a pound of care. The best way to beat burnout is to keep it from happening in the first place. Take action before everyone is feeling burned out.

### *Education*

Reframing burnout prevention as a dual responsibility of the organization and the individual is essential. Conducting educational programs around the issue of burnout will let workers know it is an important area of concern in the organization.

### *Catch Early*

Everyone should learn the first signs of burnout since it is easier to deal with in the earlier stages. Individuals tend to see signs in others before seeing them in themselves,

so good communication can allow workers to help each other. An atmosphere of trust and support which impacts the organization's social and psychological components contributes to concern for others.

#### *Standard Review/Pre-Burnout Check-Ups*

Regular reviews of the work environment are essential for a healthy organization. By identifying aspects of the job most clearly linked with burnout, the organization can institute changes which will impact the job setting and forestall future problems. Pre-burnout checkup with peers and/or supervisors can be especially helpful to maintain an atmosphere of caring, concern, support and attention to burnout. These highlight the importance of the issue in the organization and communicate that it will be directly addressed.

#### *Forewarned of Job Stress*

Letting people know ahead of time of the stressors and emotional demands of a job can allow expectations to match reality. When high ideals, high expectations and reality do not match, burnout becomes more likely. Forewarning workers may help avoid feelings of mistrust, anger, frustration and disillusionment. This is especially necessary when recruiting volunteers for such high intensity job placements as dealing with domestic violence, crisis hotlines, rape, hospice, homelessness, mental illness, chronic illness and child abuse.

#### *Be Prepared*

Know oneself, the organization and the workers. Build in the flexibility to suit the workers at any given time. Conduct yearly assessments. Conduct workshops to teach and/or practice interpersonal skills, communication skills, signs and symptoms

of burnout and discuss individual coping strategies. Remember, it is the chronic, day-to-day emotional stresses that are more associated with burnout than the occasional crises.

#### **Conclusion**

Learning this new approach to burnout was very helpful and enlightening for workshop participants. When asked at the end of the workshop for feedback, some common responses were: "I felt let off the hook, that burnout wasn't all my fault or responsibility." "It opened my eyes to a new way of viewing burnout, one that seems more manageable." "Allows me to look at my organization in a new way." "I can't wait to get home and share these ideas with people, I feel empowered around burnout."

Is burnout inevitable? Some people think so:

"While individual differences may determine how soon one will burn out, how extreme the experience and what the consequences will be, the work environment determines the likelihood that burnout will occur across the board" (Maslach, 1982). Staff--both paid and volunteer--want to join together to maximize the positive and minimize the negative. If unhealthy stress can be taken out of the job from the beginning, the whole experience will be physically and emotionally less stressful. When organizational remedies, along with individual techniques, are well practiced parts of the coping styles for burnout, workers will be better able to handle problems later.

Again, burnout is not a function of "bad" people, it is more the result of the "bad" situations in which good people function. Understanding this concept in relation to burnout will keep workers motivated and alert to ways they can work

together to provide the healthiest environment possible and allow workers in the organization to feel cared for. The more stress removed from the job the better.

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### About the Author

*(At the time this was originally published...)*

Marcia Kessler, President of Marcia Kessler Consulting and Training, Eugene, Oregon, worked extensively in the fields of Volunteer Administration and Crisis Intervention. She was an active program consultant and had presented Volunteer Management workshops at national and international conferences. Since 1987, she had been the primary trainer in Volunteer Administration for the Voluntary Action Center of Eugene. Prior to this, Ms. Kessler administered the volunteer program for Womenspace, an Oregon shelter for victims of domestic violence, and was Director of "Together," the crisis intervention hotline at the Free Medical Clinic of Greater Cleveland. She maintained a private mental health counseling practice, was a graduate of the University of Cincinnati and earned a Master's Degree in Counseling Psychology at the University of Oregon.