

Guide: Leading Head Start through Burnout

It's important for leaders to learn how to identify burnout, the factors contributing to it, and ways to prevent it.



Burnout is more likely when people:

- Expect too much of themselves
- Never feel that the work they are doing is good enough
- Feel inadequate or incompetent
- Feel unappreciated for their work efforts
- Have unreasonable demands placed upon them
- Are in roles that are not a good job fit

Prevention strategies for staff

The following strategies have been proven to help people recover from burnout.

- **Provide clear expectations** for all employees and obtain confirmation that each employee understands those expectations.
- **Make sure employees have the necessary resources** and skills to meet expectations.
- **Provide ongoing training** to employees to maintain competency.
- **Help employees understand their value to the organization** and their contributions to its goals.

Prevention strategies (cont'd)

- **Enforce reasonable work hours**, including, if necessary, sending employees without good boundaries home at the end of their regular work day.
- **Help assess workload** for those who feel pressured to remain working beyond normal business hours.
- **Set reasonable and realistic expectations.** Organizations should be clear about which activities require the highest standards and when it is okay to lower the bar and still meet business needs.
- **Encourage social support and respect** within and among work teams.
- **Support physical activity** throughout the workday.
- **Strongly encourage the taking of breaks away** from the work environment.

Next Page: Strategies for Overachievers

Strategies for overachievers

Those who are overachievers are at a higher risk of burnout. Overachievers often respond to work stress by taking on more work, which can be further exacerbated by a workplace that consistently looks to top performers to take on most of the toughest projects and additional tasks such as mentoring lower performers.

Strategies to balance these expectations include:

- **Avoid always requiring the overachiever to compensate for others.** Allow your top performers to work with colleagues that are at or near their level of competence. This allows more balanced sharing of a project's workload and pressures and the opportunity to learn and grow together. Having to consistently pick up the slack and/or coach lesser performers can drain a high performer's energy and morale.
- **Give high performers choices.** Many leaders assume their overachievers only want to work on the most demanding projects. In some cases, this may be true, but over time, this may move that employee further away from what they loved about their job in the first place. The leader may be surprised by which projects a higher-performing employee might enjoy working on.
- **Watch out for the "Yes" people.** The overachiever may agree to every request because they feel that it is expected, have a hard time saying "no", or underestimate the amount of time and energy that it will take. Employees who keep agreeing to do that one more thing may feel like they're never getting caught up, are inadequate, and not living up to expectations. These thoughts can be drivers of burnout.

Strategies for leaders

Leaders are particularly vulnerable to burnout because of the intrinsic nature of their job: Responsibility, stress and expectation can all place exceptional pressure on someone's emotional, physical and mental wellbeing.

Signs of leadership burnout:

- Constantly in fight or flight mode
- A feeling of constant fatigue or exhaustion
- Experience more frequent mood swings and irritability
- Loss of enthusiasm or motivation
- Feeling the need to avoid people or wanting to isolate yourself

Prevention Strategies for leaders:

- **Check-in with yourself.** Remember to check in on how you are feeling, and compare that to the identified signs of burnout. If you are feeling more tired or less enthusiastic than usual, you may be at risk of burning out. But by learning the signs of burnout and checking in on yourself, you can prioritize your self-care much earlier. [Register for Starling Minds to take a check-up.](#)
- **Identify your triggers.** Reflect whenever you noticed your mood and behavior changes as likely you will get to the source of your frustration and exhaustion. By identifying your triggers, you will be better equipped on how to manage them.
- **Build self-care into your life.** Find three little things or activities that help you feel happy and restored. For example, going for daily walks, taking a relaxing bath, exercising, buying a cup of coffee.

Prevention Strategies for leaders (cont'd):

- **Delegate more.** Be sure to organize your day and delegate smaller tasks to staff so you can focus on bigger, more important projects. This is one of the most important ways to lower your risk of burnout. Research has shown this will empower your team to expand their skill sets and capabilities.