

Clinical Review

Mitigating Workplace Burnout Through Transformational Leadership and Employee Participation in Recovery Experiences

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Abstract

Description

Burnout is a complex organizational phenomenon that diminishes employee well-being and overall organizational productivity. Researchers propose that leadership style contributes to employees' well-being, which impacts employee productivity. Organizations and leaders must address the causes of burnout and promote techniques employees can use to mitigate burnout, such as employee participation in recovery experiences. Recovery experiences are non-work activities that create positive outlooks and restore the energy needed to focus on one's work.

This literature review examines current research in employee recovery experiences, conservation of resource theory (COR), burnout, and transformational leadership theory. Studying burnout through the lens of COR shows how important resource gain and recovery activities are to healthy employees and their job performance within the organization. The research reviewed suggests that transformational and transactional leadership styles have higher probabilities of promoting employee participation in recovery experiences than passive avoidant leadership style. The literature consistently showed burnout as a significant organizational phenomenon negatively affecting productivity, employee well-being, and turnover rates. The literature revealed that mitigating burnout happens through participation in recovery experiences. The literature on leadership styles supports the assumption that leaders play a significant role in employee well-being, group identity, and organizational climate. Leaders who desire to mitigate employee burnout will benefit from research that links transformational leadership style behaviors and employee participation in recovery activities.

Keywords

professional burnout; leadership; organizational climate; recovery experiences; psychological well-being; psychological wellness; transformational leadership; conservation of resource theory; employee productivity

Introduction

Sigmund Freud said a normal person should excel at loving and working. Unfortunately, the modern employee is overwhelmed with work stressors, which cause the employee to neither love well nor work productively. Burnout, absenteeism, and destructive mental health cause employees to under-produce and increase employee turnover in organizations.¹ Because the workplace is a “community or a society that

contributes to the sense of the individuals in terms of their identity, affiliation, worth, and meaning,”¹ creating a positive workplace environment that promotes employee well-being is essential to helping the employee handle the stressors involved with both work and life. Mitigating burnout through participation in recovery experiences creates a positive working environment where employees experience fulfillment in their work and life.

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Burnout is a significant problem affecting the American workforce. Burnout leads to poor productivity, loss of revenue, high rates of employee illness and injury, and increased turnover rates.² Recovery experiences, non-work activities that promote positive outlooks and restore the energy needed for focusing on one's work,³ help mitigate burnout and increase employee engagement.⁴ Throughout the workday, individuals experience high levels of stress that lead to resource depletion.⁵ Resource loss damages the individual, thereby making recovery experiences necessary to restore the loss of resources and rebuild healthy individuals.⁶

Recovery is conceptualized both as a process and an outcome. Sonnentag et al⁷ referred to recovery as "unwinding and restoration processes during which a person's strain level that has increased as a reaction to a stressor or any other demand returns to its prestressor level." Recovery experiences can include "unplugging" from work electronic communication, learning a new hobby, or engaging in aerobic activity.

Encouraging employees to participate in recovery experiences starts at the leadership level when organizational leaders prioritize establishing a culture that promotes employee recovery.⁸ When leaders promote a positive, healthy climate in the organization, employee effectiveness increases as they become fully attentive to their positions' tasks and responsibilities. This literature review investigated the relationship between leadership styles, as defined by transformational leadership theory, and an employee's desire to participate in recovery experiences that mitigate burnout and support success in their responsibilities.

Burnout

Burnout, a well-documented and widespread problem among organizational members, is an organizational phenomenon defined as "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed,"⁹ and is equally an individual and organizational problem.¹⁰ A potential approach to mitigating burnout is helping employees and organizations understand the importance of recovery experiences. Promoting recovery experiences at the leadership level may help employees participate in recovery activities

and lessen the complications from burnout. Leiter and Maslach¹⁰ suggested burnout is an individual-specific phenomenon; however, what happens at the individual level affects the organization's overall function.²

Causes of Burnout

Recovery experiences mitigate the impact of certain antecedent conditions leading to burnout. Negative attitudes toward an organization increase the likelihood of burnout, which creates higher voluntary turnover rates, lower job performance, and higher absenteeism rates.¹¹ Individuals experience burnout when there is no plan to replenish lost resources.¹²

According to conservation of resources theory (COR), burnout happens because of resource depletion caused by prolonged exposure to stressors in one's life.¹³ Since resource loss damages the individual, recovery helps replenish resources that increase productivity and work engagement.⁶ COR theory assumes people must accumulate, preserve, maintain, and protect the emotional, mental, and spiritual resources they value.¹³ Recovery in the context of COR is viewed not as temporary relief from losing resources,¹⁴ but an automatic, "dynamic process that aims at restoring the energetic resources."⁶

Gallup discovered 5 causes of burnout: 1) unfair treatment at work, 2) unmanageable workload, 3) unclear communication from managers, 4) lack of manager support, and 5) unreasonable time pressure.¹⁵ Unfair treatment at work happens when employees believe they are victims of bias, favoritism, mistreatment, inconsistently applied compensation, and vague corporate policies. Unmanageable workload refers to employees' perception that they have too much to do. These employees are twice as likely to experience burnout. Although hours spent working contribute to unmanageable workload, how people experience their workload determines if they are burned out. Employees who experience flexibility with their schedules, have adequate time for breaks, and have agency within their responsibilities tend to work more hours than the average employee while reporting higher levels of personal well-being.¹⁶ Unreasonable time pressure is the perception that employees never have enough time to accomplish their tasks. Employees who feel they

have adequate time to accomplish their tasks are 70% less likely to burn out. All 3 preceding burnout causes address organizational climate issues contributing to employee burnout. Fostering an organizational culture that promotes better health may lessen the effects of burnout associated with these causes.

The other 2 causes of burnout identified in the Gallup study relate to employees' perceptions of their leaders. Unclear communication refers to not receiving the information necessary to do the required tasks. Dans and Lundmark¹⁷ noted that when leaders create an environment of open communication, employees are more likely to experience a positive workplace where they maintain excellence in their work. The final cause of employee burnout, as identified by Gallup, is a lack of manager support. Employees who feel supported by their managers receive a psychological buffer that keeps employees at ease, even when the task or job situation is challenging.¹⁵ Bennett et al¹⁸ found that manager support is essential to employees participating in recovery experiences. The preceding 2 causes of burnout highlight leaders' influence in helping employees maintain their well-being. A leader who promotes participation in recovery experience can help their employees burn out less and accomplish more for the organization.

The recent global pandemic exposed new contributors to burnout. Working from home caused longer workdays and less concentration on work.¹⁹ Zoom fatigue is a major concern as daily meetings via Zoom are extremely hard on the brain and lead to higher levels of exhaustion.²⁰ The colloquial term "Great Resignation" describes the high number of employees who left their current jobs due to burnout, toxic workplaces, and poor leadership.²¹

Complications of Burnout

Workplace burnout leads to overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and lack of accomplishment.²² Emotional exhaustion is described as a wearing out, loss of energy, depletion of resources, and fatigue.²² One who is experiencing overwhelming exhaustion feels emotionally overextended and unable to focus on their tasks.²³ Maslach and Jackson²⁴ defined feelings of cynicism as a lack of caring and depersonalization when interacting with others. Cynicism becomes a coping mechanism

that allows employees to view their work as impersonal and keeps them from becoming too attached to the organization.²³ Lack of accomplishment is inefficacy with one's work, described as reduced productivity or capability and low morale.²² Bakker and Oerlemans²⁵ explored how diminished self-confidence leads to lower work performance and found that low morale keeps employees from being engaged in the organizational tasks assigned to them.

Since health care professionals focus on the needs of others, burnout is an ongoing issue and focus for many caregivers and health systems.²⁶ In medical professions, burnout leads to physical and mental exhaustion, undermining patient care. Rotenstein et al²⁶ found that up to 70% of medical professionals suffer from burnout. Medical professionals suffering from burnout are twice as likely to succumb to patient safety incidents than those medical professionals who are not suffering from burnout.²⁷ Most recently, the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses found that 66% of critical care nurses consider leaving their jobs due to burnout and stress associated with the global pandemic.²⁸

Recovery Experiences

Creating and promoting a culture of recovery experiences allows leaders to improve the positive states of employees and decrease levels of burnout experienced, by employees by engaging in workplace practices that promote positive states and foster resourcefulness. Mitigating burnout involves individuals and organizations collectively engaging in the practice of recovery. As previously stated, Sonnentag et al⁷ referred to recovery as an "unwinding and restoration process during which a person's strain level that has increased as a reaction to a stressor or any other demand returns to its pre-stressor level."

The general use of the term recovery explains what happens when something that is considered lost returns to its original state. In her groundbreaking study, Sonnentag²⁹ described recovery as a process where "the demands previously put on the individual's psychobiological systems are removed and the individual engages in below-baseline activity." Organizational and individual recovery happens as leaders and employees regain the passion, optimism,

and positive states of work engagement that enhance productivity and advance the organizational mission.³⁰

Another use of the term recovery refers to the process of restoring health from illness. Creating healthy employees and leaders is central to the concept of recovery. Steffens et al³¹ wrote, "If organizations are able to foster and maintain a healthy workforce, they may be able not only to reduce employee's suffering but... benefit from greater productivity." Recovery practices create a sustainable workplace where employment practices, procedures, and policies are linked to "employees' work-life balance and well-being, enabling them to thrive in their personal family lives and perform well" in the organization.³²

Recovery as a Process and as an Outcome

Recovery is conceptualized both as a process and an outcome. Recovery as a process addresses the activities and experiences that help one prepare for effective job engagement.¹⁸ Recovery as an outcome refers to a change in strain indicators that return people to a pre-stressor level.⁷ The recovery outcome is the psychological or physiological state reached where the individual feels they recovered the energy lost from the previous work experience.⁷ By distinguishing recovery as a process and an outcome, individuals can assess the intended recovery process according to absolute recovery levels or relative recovery levels, thereby determining if the recovery process is complete or if further recovery activities and experiences are needed.³³

Recovery activities are experiences and behaviors that help individuals through the recovery process toward the outcome of recovery. Recovery activities are void of any vocation-related obligations and considerations. Sonnentag and Fritz³⁴ identified four dimensions of recovery experiences that help one recover: detachment from work-related tasks, relaxation, mastery experiences, and agency experiences.

Psychological Detachment From Work

Employees who engage in the recovery experience of psychological detachment find a

renewed commitment to their workday activities on the next day of work. Psychological detachment is the subjective experience of leaving work behind, to "switch off," and to forget about work during non-work time.⁷ Psychological detachment contributes to achieving a positive state of recovery,³⁴ and Weigelt et al³⁵ discovered that thinking about the job during off-job times contributed to poor performance during the next day. However, the study also found that thinking about work while away from work is not negative; instead, the type of thinking contributes either to engagement or burnout. Those who thought positively about their job outside of work hours are more likely to engage in the job than those who thought negatively about the job.³⁵

Relaxation

Relaxation is a psychological and physical state of minimal activity.³⁰ Those who refuse to unwind during off-job times are negatively affected and unable to perform at peak levels during on-job times.³⁶ Deliberate practices, such as meditation, focused breathing, and napping, provide calm to the body and give respite to the individual.³⁷

Mastery

Mastery experiences during non-work time produce low levels of psychological distress and high levels of vigor during work-related activities.^{3,37} Mastery experiences are off-job activities that provide challenges and opportunities for learning.³⁰ Recovery is not only passive but an active process that may challenge the individual by getting fully immersed in an experience that stretches the individual. Off-job activities that "distract from the job by providing challenging experiences and learning opportunities in other domains" bring renewed interest in tackling on-job demands.³⁴

Control (Agency)

Agency experiences occur as one decides to put themselves first and choose to do something without regard for another person.⁷ Control is the ability to "choose an action from two or more options."³⁴ During non-work hours, the experience of agency leads to increased self-efficacy and feelings of competency.³⁴ Agency in the previous evening created more significant levels of proactive behavior during the workday.

Leadership Styles Effect on Burnout and Recovery

In a mixed-method study of full-time employees in the United States (US), Bennett et al¹⁸ explored the relationship between organizational cultures and the promotion of employee participation in recovery experiences. The authors found that leaders need to recognize the importance of recovery to sustain employee well-being and researchers need to conduct further research to “identify how different leader orientations relate” to employee participation in recovery experiences.¹⁸ Many organizations have a culture that elevates overworking, which leads to increased employee burnout.²⁵ Employees are consistently asked to work more hours, take work home, and be ready to return to the workplace at a moment’s notice.³⁸ Leaders are directly responsible for creating a culture where recovery is valued, promoted, and rewarded.^{8,31}

Leadership matters to organizations and the individuals in the organizations. Leadership style has a positive or negative correlation with organizational performance.³⁹ Bennett et al¹⁸ recognized the overemphasis on outcomes and less focus on the drivers of recovery. Leadership serves as the catalyst for executing policies and procedures that allow organizations to promote positive organizational cultures.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is considered the most crucial factor in building employee engagement.⁴⁰ Transformational leaders expect more from followers through positively motivating followers to adopt core behaviors that enhance the well-being of the follower.⁴¹ Transformational leadership is linked to improved performance, decreased burnout, and lower organizational turnover. According to Zhu et al,⁴² transformational leadership focuses on increasing follower development, which is the focus of psychological empowerment. Because transformational leaders attempt to develop the full potential of followers and empower the follower to interact with the organization through their highest potential,⁴¹ followers are more likely to view their association with their organization as a positive identification. At the core of transformational leadership is the ambition of transformational leaders to induce

employees to transcend their self-interest for the sake of the organization.⁴³

Transformational leaders use idealized influence to set high standards, inspirational motivation to challenge followers to achieve more than they thought possible, intellectual stimulation to encourage innovation and creativity, and individualized consideration to address the unique needs of individual followers.⁴⁴ A transformational leader uses idealized influence to push followers to their fullest potential. Transformational leaders use inspirational motivation to enhance meaning and promote positive expectations about the tasks necessary to accomplish the mission and vision of the organization. Because burnout is increasing among employees in all industries,¹⁵ intellectual stimulation may generate positive promotion of recovery activities once held as taboo in organizational effectiveness.¹⁷ When leaders discover the importance of recovery experiences, they use individualized consideration to establish ways to promote recovery experiences that meet the specific needs of their followers.

Multiple empirical studies support the relationship between transformational leadership style and employee well-being. Liyanage⁴⁵ conducted a narrative synthesis that showed how transformational leadership predicted employee well-being through several socio-psychological mechanisms. Liyanage⁴⁵ summarized findings from 30 research papers and illustrated how transformational leadership style contributes to employee well-being. The findings showed that transformational leadership has a significant and positive relationship with quality of working life and a negative relationship with burnout, in addition to reducing strain on the employee through replenishment of resources.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership focuses on what a leader must do to manage the status quo and maintain daily working operations.⁴⁴ Three variations define transactional leadership: contingent reward, active management by exception, and passive management by exception.⁴⁶ Followers of transactional leadership do what is expected in order to avoid punishment and receive a reward. Transactional leaders act when they know of a serious problem or when it is necessary to address a need of the organi-

zation. Active transactional leadership is crucial to organizational identification.⁴² Followers of transactional leadership can benefit from organizational identification when the organization values employee participation in recovery experiences.

Passive Avoidant Leadership

Passive avoidant leadership style is least effective in promoting employee participation in recovery experiences. Avolio⁴⁷ considered all leadership styles important but stated an organization may benefit from recognizing that transformational and transactional leadership styles could be more effective than passive avoidant leadership style. Passive avoidant leadership style causes the leader to avoid any responsibility related to the health and well-being of the employee. Leaders with a passive avoidant leadership style avoid problems, delay taking action, and await the consequences of decisions to unfold without considering the well-being of the employee or the organization.⁴⁷ Organizations that desire to keep employee productivity high should train their leaders to use transformational and transactional leadership styles as necessary and discourage passive avoidant leadership style.

Implications for Leaders and Organizations

Leadership style matters when it comes to promoting employee participation in recovery experiences. In a survey of health care professionals from a mid-sized Midwestern US company, Pladdys⁴⁸ discovered that transformational leadership style and transactional leadership style had a higher probability of promoting employee participation in recovery experiences than passive avoidant leadership style. Current transformational leadership theory research supports these findings and provides a possible reason for the higher probability of transactional leadership style relative to passive avoidant leadership style.

Transformational leadership style benefits from the promotion of employee participation in recovery experiences. Transformational leadership requires the leader to be a proper steward, using positive reinforcement as a means of leadership.⁴⁹ Burns described the power of a leader as lying in the ability to use positivity to create sanctioned expectations that “car-

ry more psychological and political force than hopes and aspirations.”⁴⁹ Through the sub-domains of idealized influence and inspirational motivation, leaders have opportunities to reinforce values that enhance employee well-being positively.

Idealized influence can play a significant role in a leader’s unspoken promotion of recovery experiences if the leader shows the importance of recovery experiences by example. Leaders should intentionally disconnect from work during non-work hours. By doing so, leaders demonstrate to their followers that time away from work should not involve work.

The leader’s goal is to inspire the individual for the greater good of the group, thus enhancing the organization’s productivity. Through inspirational motivation, leaders can promote recovery experiences by showing employees a preferred future through recovery experiences. Words only matter when they are followed by appropriate action. Employee onboarding should clearly communicate the value of recovery experiences by encouraging employees to accomplish all their tasks during regular work hours and use non-work hours to engage in well-being exercises such as hobbies or relaxation.

Transactional leadership style benefits the promotion of employee participation in recovery experiences, albeit in different ways than transformational leadership style. Transactional leadership style is crucial to organizational identification and can foster an organizational culture that promotes employee participation in recovery experiences. For some employees, choosing not to work during non-work hours may contradict their engrained work ethic. Some employees may think that saying “no” to their leader during non-work hours will affect their standing with the leader during regular work hours. Employees may think that working outside of regular work hours increases their reputation with their leader. Effective use of transactional leadership style can help employees understand that employee participation in recovery experiences is rewarded just as much as work productivity. For instance, employees who intentionally choose psychological detachment are not punished for turning off their electronic devices during non-work hours. Punishment can take on many forms,

from sarcastic remarks about not working hard enough to being overlooked for a promotion. Providing transactional leadership in a manner that honors employee participation in recovery experiences will require managers and leaders to value well-being over immediate results, knowing that employee well-being leads to greater productivity for the organization.

Followers of transactional leadership do what is expected to avoid punishment and receive a reward. Using contingent rewards, leaders secure agreements with employees on the necessary assignments and then promise a reward with satisfactory employee follow-through. Leaders can promote participation in recovery experiences by rewarding the employees who intentionally engage in recovery experiences. Examples of rewards might include subsidizing the cost of mastery experiences, providing additional money in an employee's health savings account for continuous exercise, or offering resources for use in employee hobbies. The key for leaders is to reward participation in recovery experiences but not use recovery experiences as a reward for working during non-work hours.

Conclusion

The organizational context is vital in shaping recovery processes, and leadership style contributes greatly to organizational climate. Employees trust organizational leaders who encourage recovery. According to leader identity entrepreneurship, leaders create a sense of group identity among team members and clarify what "us" means and does not mean, suggesting that leadership style plays a role in creating a culture by which employees determine what is essential and a priority for the organization.⁸ One's leadership style can influence employees to positive levels of well-being and focus on processes, like recovery experiences, that help them increase their effectiveness and productivity in the organization.

The study of leadership styles and employee recovery shows that building an organizational culture of recovery is necessary for healthy organizations and individuals. Employees may refuse to admit they need recovery experiences when the organizations they work for regard recovery as a sign of weakness.⁷ Steffens et al³¹ wrote, "If organizations are able to foster and maintain a healthy workforce, they may be able

not only to reduce employee's suffering but... benefit from greater productivity." Healthy individuals create healthy organizations. When organizations value recovery and promote employee recovery experiences, employees and leaders engage in healthy practices that enhance productivity.

Samul³² wrote, "A sustainable workplace should be created by employment practices, procedures, and policies that link employees' work-life balance and well-being, enabling them to thrive in their personal family lives and perform well. A sustainable workplace has the potential to affect not only employee's well-being but also an organization's success." Research consistently shows that burnout is more a factor of organizational practices than individual factors. The practice of recovery is more than time management, time off, or time away. Recovery is restorative, rejuvenating, and reengaging. Leaders and employees who practice recovery activities are in better health, enjoy their work, produce at higher levels, and commit longer to their organizations.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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