



Connection = Protection: Six Ways to Stay Connected with Employees (and Prevent Burnout)

Description

Part Four of a Six-Part Series

Welcome back to our series on creating cultures of mental well-being in the workplace. Last week, we zeroed-in on the importance of empathetic leadership. As discussed, one of the key ways to become more empathetic is to focus on building emotional bank accounts with employees.

Every job comes with stressors that lead to withdrawals from people's emotional bank accounts. And of course, COVID-19 has taken a huge toll. That's why leaders need to get intentional about making deposits—which means finding ways to forge genuine connections with employees. When we're engaged with people in real and meaningful ways, not only do we strengthen their sense of connection to their work and the organization, we built trust. Our relationship becomes a support system that helps them navigate tough times and, hopefully, stave off burnout.

We have found that “connection equals protection.” The more connected people feel, the more protected they are from the impacts of stress and trauma and the less likely they are to burn out. A few tips to help you create meaningful connections with employees:

Really get to know them. It's critical that leaders get in the trenches and spend some one-on-one time with each employee. This focused time with them will allow you to look for signs of burnout, stress, and anxiety. One great way to make sure this happens is to do regular leader rounding. In terms of engagement tactics, this one is a powerhouse. It really shows people that you care and that you understand they don't operate in a vacuum. Round on employees regularly with an eye toward finding out what's going on in their lives. Hardwire this practice.

Essentially, leaders put a system in place to make sure they regularly meet with each direct report. They ask a series of questions aimed at getting to know people and making sure they have what they need to do their best work. In the best of times, rounding is a tool for creating a great employee experience. In the worst of times, it's a lifeline for making a deep human connection, reducing uncertainty (and anxiety), and ensuring that employees are truly “okay.”

As you round, notice changes in work habits or work style, changes in communication (short, brief

emails, when they would normally give expanded answers), missing meetings, disorganization, or anything that seems out of the ordinary. You may also check with your HR department to make sure you know what signs to look for that indicate people may be burned out, stressed out, traumatized, anxious, or depressed. Many organizations have amazing protocols for detecting problems for early intervention, including well-developed programs giving leaders the skills to respond appropriately when they feel someone could be in trouble.

Pay attention to people's personal struggles. Maybe you can help. [Jay Kaplan](#), MD, FACEP, medical director of care transformation at LCMC Health in New Orleans, spoke as part of our month-long [Gratitude Symposium](#). He said that, as leaders, we may have no idea what employees are experiencing and feeling. We don't know if they've lost a family member or a good friend, if their partner has lost their job, or if their kids are struggling. The purpose of meeting one-on-one is to determine what they most need and to alleviate their issues where you can. There may be things you can do to help that they've never considered.

When you ask what an employee needs, don't just say, "I understand." Ask specifically what you can do for them at this moment to make things better. When [Liz Jazwiec, RN](#), an authority on leadership, employee engagement, and service excellence, spoke at the Gratitude Symposium, she said, "Ask what people need from you. Not what they need from the Universe, but from you."

Meet people where they are. Rather than placing expectations on employees—focusing on how they "should" feel or behave—seek to understand their perspective. Acknowledge and validate how they are feeling. Feeling understood is a powerful human need.

Try not to take things personally. What you're seeing may have nothing to do with you and very little to do with work. Life happens, and it's not easy to leave negative emotions at the door.

Acknowledge it even if you can't change it. People may be frustrated and disappointed by some things happening in the workplace. You don't always have to fix the problem. We may know someone is having a hard time, but if we can't change it, we might sweep it under the rug. When we avoid conversations because we don't have an answer, trust breaks down. What people often want is to be heard and understood, even if you can't change it. It might just be taking ten minutes out of your day to sit with people and acknowledge what they are going through.

Shift your perspective. We have a lot of trouble stepping out of our own shoes and into someone else's. When they tell their story, we can't hear it, because we are too mired in our own story. We're thinking, *You think you have it rough? What if you had to deal with my problems?* Try to approach every interaction from a place of, *How can I put myself in this person's shoes? What can I do to make their life easier?*

Leaders are always looking for the perfect employee. It's just human to want to deal with "easy" people. It makes our lives smoother and more pleasant. But being a leader has never been about easy, smooth, and pleasant. We learn the most from those who challenge us. They are the ones who push us to grow.

Approach every employee interaction through a lens of "what does this person need?" rather than "what is this person doing wrong?" The leader's role is to have a positive impact on the person. Ask why they are behaving the way they are. Maybe they're scared or confused or worried. We know stress

and trauma can manifest as belligerence, lashing out, resistance to change, etc.

Once we peel back the layers and see the fear that's causing employees to behave this way, it changes everything. Instead of being aggravated, we feel empathy for them, which in turn frees us to act with compassion. And we quickly come to see that every "challenging" employee is an opportunity to make a difference in someone's life, and also to grow as leaders and as people.

This allows us to help people when they are on the brink of burnout or in the throes of a mental health crisis. Even better, when we practice these skills regularly, we might help prevent them from getting to that point in the first place.

When we are able to see our employees' struggles and help them alleviate issues, it fulfills us in a deep way. It replenishes our emotional bank account, connects us to that crucial sense of meaning and purpose, and goes a long way toward preventing and healing burnout. (In other words, it re-engages us, and engagement is the opposite of burnout.)

I hope you'll check back in next week for the next installment in our series, on how a well-run organization is an antidote to stress and burnout. Thank you for reading.

If you'd like to access a few relevant resources—The Well-Being Handbook (eBook), The Well-Being Tool Kit, and The Well-Being Video—please visit <https://thegratitudegroup.com/faculty/quint-studer/>.

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