

Skepticism in the Workplace: Hear What Isnâ??t Being Said

Description

Burnout has been a hot topic for quite some timeâ??and itâ??s only getting hotter. There have always been pockets of burnout, especially in high-stress industries like healthcare, but over the past two years, the condition has reached an all-time high. So is it easy to tell if an employee is slipping into burnout? Not always. In fact, your clue might be something as subtle as one snarky comment too many.

At times, of course, burnout is easy to spot. If an employeeâ??s job performance takes a nosedive, or they start calling in sick a lot, itâ??s not too big of a leap to assume burnout could play a role. But most of the time, it isnâ??t that obvious, even to the employee. Burnout sometimes comes on slowly, and the person doesnâ??t even realize itâ??s happeningâ??or at least what level itâ??s gotten to.

Other employees may hide their burnout simply because they feel loyal to their employer. Even if a person does realize theyâ??re not feeling well, they may think, *My organization is short-staffed, and they desperately need me right now. If I donâ??t come in, the restaurant wonâ??t be able to open, or weâ??ll lose even more revenue than we already have.* They want to help, so they just keep showing up, even if theyâ??re exhausted and struggling.

Plus, many symptoms of burnout arenâ??t so obvious. Leaders may not immediately recognize them for what they are. For example, letâ??s say an employee who was previously good-natured starts showing signs of skepticism. You might notice their making snide or skeptical comments about customers or coworkers or the work itself: â??Whatâ??s the point?â?• or, â??Nobody at this company appreciates me anyway.â?• Maybe they seem negative or irritable in general. Maybe they turn their skepticism on themselves, saying things like, â??Thereâ??s no way I can do a good job on this project,â?• or, â??I never do anything right.â?•

It would be easy enough for leaders to write off the employee as having a bad attitude. But the truth is, theyâ??re probably suffering. The good news is there are things you can do to help defuse skepticism and bring the employee back to a healthier state of mind.

This is not just a nice thing to do. Itâ??s crucial for good performance. Skeptical attitudes harm workplace relationships. Theyâ??re the antithesis of engagement, teamwork, collaboration, helpfulnessâ??all the things you want your culture to encourage. Plus, theyâ??re contagious. A few

skeptical employees can spread their negative attitude, and before you know it, everyone is infected.

As a leader, here are a few interventions and tips to alleviate workplace conditions that may contribute to skepticism and, often, full-fledged burnout.

Instead of calling people out, call them in. Say something like, â??I know you are normally a really positive person and great team player. Iâ??ve noticed lately that you donâ??t seem like yourself. I am concerned about you. Would you like to talk about whatâ??s going on and what I can do to help right now?â?•

When an employee asks for something, move heaven and earth to do it. A leader can *say* they care all day long, but action is what counts. Itâ??s not always easy for employees to go out on a limb and ask for what they need. If you donâ??t do everything possible to meet the request (for a different schedule, a different work arrangement, more training, etc.), it will only reinforce a skeptical attitude.

Understand the â??trustâ?• connection. Usually, skepticism is a sign that people are feeling hopeless and powerless. They may feel unsafe, devalued, not listened to. They may see leaders as not truly having their best interests at heart. Your best defense here is a good offense. Get to work building a culture of trust. This is an everyday commitmentâ??there are no shortcuts.

Relationship Roundingâ?¢ is a great way to build trust. Itâ??s basically having regular, one-on-one conversations with employees to see what would make their lives better, check on how they are doing mentally and emotionally, and make a genuine connection. When leaders practice this kind of rounding, it creates a solid foundation of trust that typically defuses skeptical attitudes.

Rethink how you reward and recognize. One big underlying cause of skepticism is feeling unappreciated. Attack this at the source by getting proactive about reward and recognition. You might think you have a good R&R program already, but one-size-fits-all approaches rarely work.

For example, group recognition doesnâ??t seem genuine. It should happen one person at a time. Better to customize reward and recognition for individual preferences and personalities. Actually ask employees, â??How do *you* like to be rewarded and recognized?â?• (This is part of the Platinum Rule, which, unlike the Golden Rule, reminds us to â??Do unto others as THEY would want done to THEM.â?• I recently wrote a column on the Platinum Rule. To access it, click here.)

Avoid toxic positivity at all costs. Toxic positivity occurs when we try to be 100 percent positive, all the time (often in an attempt to boost morale). But glossing over real issues and negative emotions and pretending they donâ??t exist not only prevents us from needed growth and change, it comes across as inauthentic. Employees are aware that things arenâ??t perfect. Toxic positivity eats away at the trust weâ??re trying to create and actually fuels more skepticism. True optimism is grounded in realityâ??we choose to think positively while still acknowledging challenges.

Find ways to drive home the meaning of the work people do. One of the key components of burnout is a sense of disconnection from oneâ??s work. When we find ways to constantly remind people of the positive impact their work has on others (for example, by sharing stories that connect them back to mission), we show them that what they do has real meaning. Itâ??s hard to be skeptical when you can see the genuine difference youâ??re making in the lives of others.

Stay hyper-alert to dangerous mental health issues. Skepticism may not only be an early sign of burnout; it may also be linked to depression. If you suspect an employee is struggling with mental health issues, donâ??t hesitate to refer them to the EAP or other resources. (Again, a regular Relationship Rounding practice helps you look for red flags and intervene before things get worse.)

The bottom line? Employees probably arenâ??t going to tell us, â??Iâ??m burned out.â?• It is up to us to know the signs and to care enough to step in and offer helpâ??and, of course, to make changes inside our organization that keep people mentally and emotionally healthy. Protecting the well-being of the people whoâ??ve chosen to work for us is one of the most crucial, and most rewarding, tasks of being a leader.

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