

# A Leadership Solution to Workplace Stress

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## ABSTRACT

*Sources of stress can be found nearly everywhere: in school, at home, in traffic, and maybe most importantly –in the workplace. Chronic workplace stress, also known as “burnout”, has been linked with both psychological and physiological illnesses. As most Americans spend about half of their waking hours at work, the workplace is an excellent location to evaluate specific risk factors and implement stress reducing programs. Although a number of such programs are currently in practice, the majority of them only offer techniques and coping mechanisms to individuals already exhibiting some, or several, of the many severe symptoms of chronic stress. The purpose of this paper is to propose a new upstream solution to workplace stress by implementing the 1985 Bennis and Nanus model of leadership into the managerial practices within businesses. In addition to reducing employee mal-health, healthcare costs, and lost time due to illnesses, the model could solidify and contribute to the prestige, and growth of the public health education profession.*

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## Background

Attention to the effects of stress first became noted when the concept of “burnout” was introduced by Herbert Freudenberger (1974) as a state of being worn out and is characterized by both fatigue as well as emptiness of physical and mental power. Forty years later, the term is used multiple times on a daily basis. A student trying to finish a paper may result in “burnout.” A teacher attempting to educate distracted and unmannered children may consider himself or herself to be burned out. A mother trying to cook, clean and chauffeur her children around town is a candidate for “burnout.” The list is extensive. In contrast to the frequency and easiness of admitting the presence and effects of stress, coping with stress and trying to prevent stressful situations are not addressed nearly as often. This is not to say that people already have the tools to manage stress successfully, but that stress management and prevention are not receiving significant attention. After all, who has time to address stress issues anyway?

As “burnout” specifically refers to mal-health effects resulting from chronic work stress (Toppinen-Tanner, Ahola, Koskinen, & Väänänen, 2009), and as most Americans spend about half of their waking hours at work, the workplace, in contrast to the individual’s home, is the ideal location to evaluate specific risk factors for burnout, as well as implement stress reduction programs. Although a number of businesses offer stress reduction programs, most only address solutions, such as counseling, to individuals already exhibiting some or several of the symptoms of stress.

The scope of this paper, therefore, includes the proposition of a new upstream, leadership-based solution to workplace stress. The solution involves the application of the Walter Bennis and Burt Nanus paradigm of leadership into managerial practices within small and large businesses alike. The goals of

this proposition are to (1) reduce mal-health, healthcare costs, and lost time due to illnesses and (2) solidify and contribute to the prestige, and growth of the public health education profession. The proposition is based on substantial research pertaining to risk and protective factors in many different social ecology levels.

## Significance of the Problem

There are many different degrees and dimensions of stress; whereas some are beneficial, others are detrimental to overall well-being. Of the detrimental stressors, of particular concern is job-related burnout. Although originally referenced to jobs solely related to education, health professions, and other select service occupations (Yip, & Rowlinson, 2009), it has been observed that job burnout is characteristic of all professions and has resulted in numerous mal-health effects (Bredar, & Heminway, 2008). Problems resulting from burnout include, but are not limited to, mild conditions such as headaches and insomnia (Burke & Greenglass 1986), as well as more serious, chronic conditions such as mental disorders (Malasch 2001), musculoskeletal conditions, (Toppinen-Tanner et al. 2009), respiratory illnesses (Toppinen-Tanner, Ojajärvi, Väänänen, Kalimo, & Jäppinen, 2005), increased hypercoagulable states (Kudielka, Bellingrath, & Von Känel, 2008), type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease (Bellingrath, Weigl, & Kudielka 2009). Currently, no burnout prevalence rates have been calculated for the general public. However, data concerning specific populations do exist. For example, in the study conducted by Bellingrath et al. (2009), nearly 50% of sampled teachers tested positively in the emotional exhaustion facet of the Malasch Burnout Inventory (MBI). Furthermore, according to a Dutch study, 63% of pooled medical specialists were concluded to suffer from burnout syndrome (Visser, Smets, Oort, &

deHaes 2003). Unfortunately, most studies conducted start with burned out individuals for analysis, and thus, prevalence and incidence rates of burnout syndrome are not obtained. However, as burnout syndrome results in many of our nation's top killers (e.g., cardiovascular disease and diabetes), we can assume that prevalence for stress-related illnesses is high.

In addition to affecting individuals, burnout also impacts other entities such as businesses. Toppinen-Tanner et al. (2005) concluded that burnout increased the risk of future sick leave absences because it was proven that the majority of absences are due to stress-related diseases such as mental, behavioral, and cardiovascular disease. Toppinen-Tanner et al. (2005) also linked three specific results of burnout to these future illnesses: physiological changes, psychological changes and changes in behavioral coping mechanisms (i.e., lack of exercising or increased smoking). Similar to these studies, Yip and Rowlinson, (2009) demonstrated that employee burnout leads to loss of productivity and employee turnover. It would, therefore, be in businesses' best interest to invest time and resources to try to reduce employee stress. Such an investment could lead to substantial increases in productivity, monetary gains, and overall employee satisfaction.

As professionals, public health educators assess the health needs of communities and provide the appropriate primary and secondary prevention to these communities via education and encouragement. However, with respect to the topic of stress, a known disease risk factor, we are failing. For the majority of cases, the only interventions available are secondary ones for persons already affected. It is the appreciation and application of upstream solutions that characterizes and separates public health professionals from other clinical professionals. Therefore, finding an upstream solution to stress prevention should be a primary concern for public health educators. Leadership in this area will not only increase the standard of living amongst employees and increase company success, but also serve as a model for other public health issues. Revamping would, thus, help solidify public health educators' role as a preventive force as well as contribute to the growth and scope of the public health education profession: if the profession can influence higher levels on the Social Ecology Model, than the potential for growth is infinite.

### **Factors Influencing Burnout Syndrome**

The American dream often has been defined by four popular words that can be used to define our culture: the pursuit of happiness. Unfortunately, for most Americans, happiness is not found in one idea or vision, but in an array of ambitions. Americans must have it all: higher education, travel experience, family, the dream job, a substantial income, and a

decent home. In addition to these traditional long term goals, Americans also strive to fulfill short-term objectives that include spending time with family, exercising, taking up hobbies, and preparing and eating nutritious meals. Although these ambitions are admirable, it is easy to see that some aspects of these dreams do not complement each other. In fact, it can be observed that some of them may be in direct conflict with one another. For instance, the most personally satisfying career may not necessarily be a large income profession. Likewise if one's job is a domestic and stable job, the dream to travel may not be an easy objective to fulfill.

Having such an array of non-complimentary ambitions has resulted in a culture of rushed and stressed multi-taskers. Because, as a culture, we cannot compromise anything we want, we (try to) find ways to do everything. Constantly on the go, hardly resting, and multi-tasking multiple domains of our lives have thus become almost esteemed traits to have, as they depict the image of the driven American. Based on these behaviors alone, it is easy to see how people can get stressed out. Add to this all of the products and services we must consume, purchase, or obtain and the occasional occurrence of not being able to accomplish all that which was aspired, and it becomes evident that as a culture, we are overexerting ourselves.

In addition to culture influencing stress levels, other contributing factors for burnout syndrome include personality characteristics. Similar in effect but vastly different in scope, human personality characteristics contribute to the prevalence of burnout. From decades of literature, researchers have learned that numerous personal risk factors include "overcommittedness" (Von Känel, Bellingrath, & Kudielka, 2009), perfectionistic attitudes (Stoeber, & Rennert, 2008) low self-efficacy levels (Schwarzer, & Hallum, 2008), and those with Type D (distressed) personalities (Mols, & Denollet, 2010).

Although extensive in research, personality characteristics have been proven to be only moderately capable of predicting the onset of burnout syndrome. More recently, organization risk factors have been receiving increasing attention due to the widely accepted belief that this social ecological level has a stronger influence on stress and burnout than the previously mentioned intrapersonal characteristic level. One potential explanation for this occurrence lies in numbers: organizational risk factors potentially affect everyone in the organization. Such risk factors include insufficient job satisfaction, poor management, poor accessibility to resources, restriction of personal autonomy, job insecurity, limited room for advancement, role conflict, role ambiguity, and lack of support (Visser et al. 2003; Yip, & Rowlinson, 2009; Norlund et al. 2010).

To sum up, anyone who spends regular, extended time at a job or organization that fosters any or all of the aforementioned organizational risk factors is at an increased risk for developing burnout syndrome. One does not have to have particular personality characteristics to develop the syndrome, although certain personalities are at an even greater risk for becoming burned out.

### Factors Restraining Advancements in Solutions

Given the copious determinants of stress, it is a bit of a mystery how our society can withstand such pressure. Perhaps the reason American society has not yet disintegrated from stress is the fact that our culture has been conditioning for its present state for quite some time. If we look at history and politics, we can observe a composition of traits that have driven our country into its present condition. For example, the origin of our country clearly demonstrates many aspects of our current society. In response to other countries' hierarchical systems, whose oppressed citizens could not significantly influence their fate, America was founded on concepts of limited political involvement to foster principals pertaining to the ability to create one's ideal life. Citizens went straight to work to earn that which was desired. To make work easier, gifted and talented individuals created new methods to conserve both time and money. These inventions then saved so much time and money, that work was then pursued in other areas to obtain even more things that were coveted. This trend has continued through generations. Now, due to numerous brilliant inventors, we are not only capable of owning computers and cell phones, but feel the need to acquire more advanced technologies such as laptops, iPads and iPhones that, of course, make life easier.

But life is not so much easier. Indiscriminant of most social factors, stress and burnout prevail everywhere, and the repercussions are serious. However, being stressed out is not a deviant condition, but a popular cultural norm. It is perhaps mainly for this reason that stress prevention and stress reduction receive little attention by individuals, friends, organizations, communities and politics. How can one prevent one's own personal stress, when one values the idea of achieving everything? How does one justify spending more time on something such as counseling when there are so many other things that need to be done? Finally, how can a team decide to tackle stress at a broader, more community based level, if burnout is considered as something only slightly unfortunate?

Consequently, although substantial amounts of attention have been given to studying the causes and effects of work related stress, not much attention has been dedicated to investigating or implementing effective methods to reduce the severity of these pressures. Most interventions to date use a

downstream approach to address burnout, and thus, focus on educating and counseling individuals who are already experiencing psychological or physiological symptoms. These interventions, which include cognitive restructuring, time management, relaxation techniques, diaphragmatic breathing, meditation, and yoga have proven to be successful in reducing the impact of burnout symptoms in those who *initiate* and *complete* the treatment (Wallace 2007; Kushnir, & Milbauer, 1994). However, in terms of cost effectiveness, it seems logical to try to implement a more upstream approach so as to (1) reach, influence and affect greater populations, and (2) prevent onset stress induced conditions. Despite the current research that the most effective modes of health prevention are found in the higher levels of the socio-ecology model (Coreil, 2010), upstream approaches have received considerably less attention. Although few in number, studies that have researched this approach have contributed valuable findings. For example, in a study conducted by Yip and Rowlinson (2009), organizational interventions proved to reduce burnout in previously affected employees. Interventions revolved around job redesign and included measures to reduce role overload, role conflict, role ambiguity, and conflicts with working hours. The results of the study, in accordance with the findings that increasing resource accessibility decreases burnout (Kushnir, & Milbauer, 1994) imply that job redesign can be used as an effective managerial technique for employee burnout.

### Implications for Leadership

The success of Yip and Rowlinson's intervention study poses a series of questions and ideas pertaining to *preventive* organizational methods. Combining Yip and Rowlinson's job redesign theory with a concrete leadership model could result in successful burnout prevention strategies. The remainder of this paper, then, is to propose a job redesign for businesses involving the implementation of a successful leadership model that would not only eliminate a majority of the known occupational risk factors for burnout, but also promote protective factors.

There is a wide spectrum of leadership models and strategies that supervisors can employ for conducting everyday duties. However, given the vast literature linking certain organizational qualities to burnout syndrome, it is wise for managers and supervisors alike to incorporate leadership paradigms that reduce these risk factors. Likewise, it is sensible to use a model that also promotes protective factors. A model that satisfies both sides of this spectrum is the 1985 Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus model of leadership.

The model suggests that leaders should lead by (1) "pulling" as opposed to "pushing," (2) inspiring instead of ordering, (3) holding challenging, yet achievable expectations and rewarding progress, and (4) encouraging others to use their own experiences and initiatives (McDermott, 2010). To acquire and carry out these leadership traits, the model also suggests the following four strategies: (1) attention through vision, (2) meaning through communication, (3) trust through positioning, and (4) deployment of self (McDermott 2010). If practiced correctly, this model could protect employees from the many of the aforementioned burnout risk factors such as role ambiguity, role conflict, restricted personal autonomy, poor management, poor job satisfaction, and job uncertainty.

Role conflict and role ambiguity arise partially due to uncertainty or discordance between job role and expectations. Therefore, eliminating this confusion is necessary to reduce role conflict and ambiguity. A way to reduce confusion is to implement one of the strategies proposed by Nanus and Benis, "attention through vision." Attention through vision is the process in which one creates a focus of possible and desirable objectives through mental imaging (McDermott 2010). If employees have clear mental images of what objectives are, then little misunderstanding can arise. Yip and Rowlinson (2009) proved this strategy was effective. By creating and displaying charts to demonstrate and define each specific role and its relationship to the overall supporting structure of the institution, they managed to decrease both role conflict and role ambiguity among employees.

Role conflict and role ambiguity have been shown to be influenced by numerous other factors- including many of the previously mentioned organizational risk factors for burnout such as restricted personal autonomy, poor management and low job satisfaction (Yip & Rowlinson 2009). Therefore, to reduce role ambiguity and role conflict, these factors must also be addressed. A great option to accomplish this is through the implementation of the remaining Benis and Nanus strategies. The second strategy, meaning through communication, consists of influencing, organizing and sharing meaning within the group (McDermott 2010). The third strategy, trust through positioning, requires clear, consistent and reliable communication and adherence to a particular position or stance (McDermott 2010). The last strategy, deployment of self, involves not only regarding oneself positively but also regarding and perceiving others in a positive light. It also involves knowing one's self worth and stimulating the enhancement of skills in both one's own life as well as others (McDermott 2010). The utilization of these three Bennis and Nanus strategies would eliminate any feelings of restricted personal autonomy. By actively communicating

truthfully and reliably, and by stimulating personal enhancement, employees should feel that their personal goals are not just heard, but understood and taken into great consideration in determining the employee's duties. Furthermore, the integration of all these strategies should reduce the risk of job dissatisfaction and anger towards management.

In addition to risk factors, research has indicated that there exists a multitude of protective factors against burnout. Some protective factors include the presence of defined roles, room for advancement, personal growth, goal promotion, substantial support, participative involvement, and transformational leadership (Angermeier, Dunford, Boss, & Boss, 2009; Lambie, 2006; Visser et al. 2003; Yip & Rowlinson, 2010; Nielsen, & Munir 2009). As these components hold nearly opposite denotations as the risk factors, it is easy to see how a model that reduces certain risk factors can also promote and foster their opposite, protective factors. Many components of the Bennis and Nanus framework do just this. Such components include the presence of defined roles, substantial support, room for advancement, personal growth, and goal promotion.

Of particular interest are the protective factors "transformational leadership" and "participative involvement." According to James MacGregor Burns, who coined the term 'transformational leadership' in 1979, a transformational leader is one which fosters engagement with others in such a way that leaders and followers "raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (McDermott 2010). Transformational leaders have characteristics and skills that can foster participative management, which, according to Visser et. al (2003), is a system in which (1) motivation is stimulated by group involvement, (2) communication exists throughout the organization with high degrees of trust and confidence, and (3) collaboration and decision making is found in setting goals, improving methods and evaluating progress. It is a system in which a supervisor would give direction, but leave the decisions to be made based on the opinions of the majority of participants (Rue, & Byars, 2000). The Bennis and Nanus model , can, therefore, be classified as a participative system. As employees in highly participative work climates had 79% lower burnout (Visser et al. 2003) it is probable that modeling organizations after the Bennis and Nanus paradigm will do the same.

## Conclusion

As most Americans spend about half of their waking hours at work, the workplace is an excellent location to tackle the increasing severity of symptoms pertaining to stress. Based on the substantial literature available on the condition, it seems that an upstream solution should be implemented so as to positively and effectively impact and prevent job-related burnout.

This paper proposes that managerial leadership techniques that incorporate transformative leadership and participative methods, such as the 1985 Bennis and Nanus model of leadership, would be effective in reducing burnout. In addition to reducing employee mal-health, healthcare costs, and lost time due to illnesses, the model could re-solidify public health educators' role as a *preventive* profession, and contribute to the prestige, and growth of the profession.

Although this paper has focused on the relationship between corporate managerial techniques and their effects on employee health, it is noteworthy to conjecture that this method of stress prevention could be applied to other domains in society. Teachers constitute one of the groups of individuals to have high rates of burnout syndrome. As we begin the debate on how to reform our education system, we should bear in mind the effects that leadership can provide. Not only will teachers be more successful if certain leadership practices are in place, but it can be theorized that children will do well if classrooms adopt a similar leadership style. Furthermore, as the nation struggles to reform and redefine both healthcare and the economy, it is important to remember the public health sector. If we want to reduce costs in health care and if we want to reduce expenditures and increase profits in corporations, we should start by implementing systems that foster the wellbeing of employees.

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