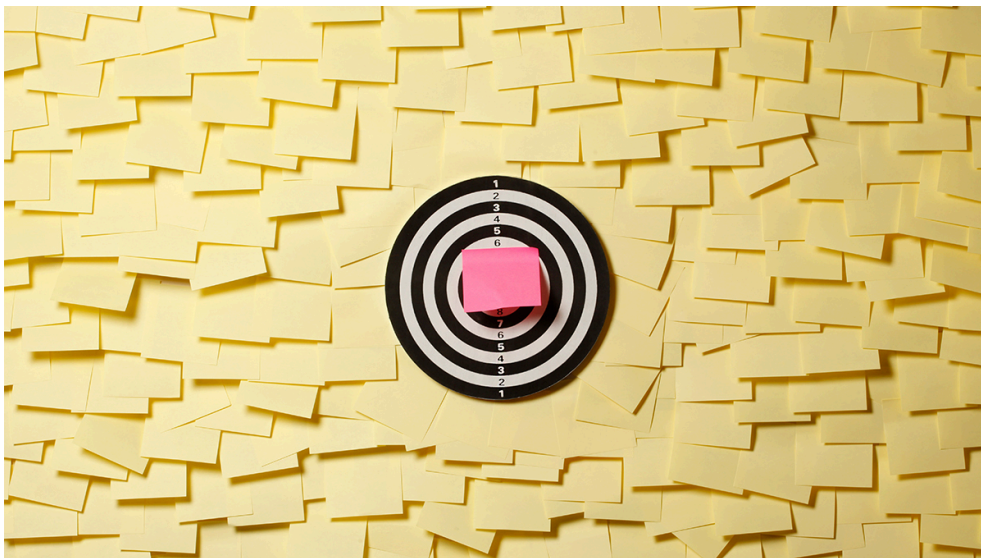


# Making Work Less Stressful and More Engaging for Your Employees

by Natalia Peart

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**Summary.** Today, the ideal job candidate is an innovative, forward-thinking worker who can do more in less time (and do it well). But, eventually, this kind of culture leads to serious productivity loss and burnout. To battle burnout and successfully lead teams, managers... [more](#)

We all know that excessive stress is a health hazard. What is less talked about are the effects of burnout on business performance. Stress makes people nearly three times as likely to leave their jobs, temporarily impairs strategic thinking, and dulls creative abilities. Burnout, then, is a threat to your bottom line, one that costs the U.S. more than \$300 billion a year in absenteeism, turnover, diminished productivity, and medical, legal, and insurance costs.

The more companies realize this, the more the workplace wellness sector grows. But individual-level perks like onsite gyms and nap rooms are not the answer to our problem. In a recent study, researchers found that while there is an expectation that wellness programs will reduce health care spending and absenteeism within a year or two, they often do not. This study adds to the growing body of work suggesting that such programs are not as effective as we think.

Instead, employers need to shift to organization-level approaches for reducing stress at work, ones that foster employee well-being while simultaneously improving business performance. While this may seem unrealistic, it's not. Over a decade of experience as a clinical psychologist and leadership consultant has taught me that burnout prevention requires reducing workplace stress while also upping employee engagement. Here's how to do both.

### **Create a Work Environment That Decreases Stress**

When employees are put in a high-stress situation — whether from unclear expectations, unreasonable deadlines, or a hectic workspace — they are at risk of moving into fight-or-flight mode. This is something that happens to our bodies when we feel threatened. The primal, more emotional, parts of our brains take over, and our ability to think long term, strategize, and innovate decreases. If we stay in this mode too long, eventually, we get burned out. To counter this effect, you need to build a secure work environment and incorporate stress reduction habits into your team's daily workflows.

**Increase psychological safety.** If your employees perceive your workplace as a threat, then you cannot build the trust your team needs to collaborate and innovate effectively. In her book, *The Fearless Organization*, Amy Edmondson describes three steps you can take to build psychological safety. First, make your expectations obvious by giving your employees clear goals. Second, make sure everyone feels like their voices are heard, and that everyone knows that you *want* their voices to be heard. You can do this by inviting people to speak up in meetings and conducting brainstorming sessions more than you impose top-down decisions. Third, develop a work environment that is both challenging and unthreatening. Let people know it's okay to fail. Recognize team members who think outside the box, and ask your employees for feedback regularly to show you're all in it together.

**Build regular break times into the workday.** The human brain can focus for around 90-120 minutes before it needs to rest. That's why you should encourage your employees to step away from their desks and mentally disengage from challenging tasks every couple of hours. Suggest they go for a short walk (especially if they have been in a series of long meetings), send out calendar invites reminding them to take breaks, and try to lead by example. Letting their minds rest and moving their bodies will provide your team with the mental space they need to perform well consistently.

**Encourage the use of private workspaces when team members need to focus.** Open offices are prone to distractions, increasing stress and decreasing productivity. There is sometimes a built-in expectation that employees must always be available for impromptu meetings and discussions as a result of the office layout. If you don't have private workspaces where employees can go to focus or decompress, try using signals like "do not disturb" signs when needed, or scheduling "quiet hours" when people can work.

**Set boundaries around time outside of work.** Teams that are not all in one location might need to work outside of traditional hours from time to time. However, the blurring of work and personal time is a significant source of job stress. A study found that it is not just answering emails that increases employees' anxiety — it is also the expectation that they will be available to do so outside of work hours. To combat this, set clear guidelines and follow them. Send emails and make calls after hours only when it's urgent — and set the bar very high.

**Look into flexible work policies.** If you want a highly adaptive team, then create an adaptable work environment. Give your employees flexibility by allowing them to work staggered hours, taking into account their varying needs. Hold one-on-one meetings to understand those needs and find alternative arrangements for people who are struggling with work-life balance.

### **Build Employee Engagement**

Decades of data have confirmed that higher employee engagement, or the strength of the mental and emotional connection an employee feels toward their workplace, has many

positive benefits — including reduced stress, improved health and job satisfaction, as well as increased productivity, job retention, and profitability.

**Be transparent.** If your team members are confused about how their work connects to and serves both the short- and long-term company goals, they will naturally become more stressed and less productive — especially in times of uncertainty. Part of your job is to help them see the big picture, or the role they play in helping the company achieve its larger goals. While you may not be able to share everything with your team, you can provide them with the information they need to understand how their work is contributing to the company's mission. If they are curious about something that you are unable to share, be transparent about why. You want to reduce the stress that accompanies ambiguity. One study of 2.5 million teams found that, when managers communicated daily with their direct reports, employees were three times as likely to be engaged than when their managers did not communicate regularly with them. Still, only 40% of employees say they are well-informed about their company's strategic goals.

**Make sure people are in the right roles.** If your team members loathe doing their jobs, then they are naturally going to be less engaged. To ensure that their talents and strengths are aligned with the expectations and responsibilities of their roles, check in with each of your direct reports regularly. These conversations don't need to be formal — talk to them about their passions, interests, and goals. Use the information you gather to assign projects they will find meaningful, and follow up to ensure they have the tools they need to succeed.

**Give as much autonomy as you can.** When possible, give your team control over how they manage their projects. Employees are 43% less likely to experience high levels of burnout when they have a choice in deciding what tasks to do, when to do them, and how much time to spend on each. To make sure someone is ready to work independently, one researcher suggests asking them to shadow you on a task or project first, and then allowing them to practice under your supervision. During this time you can give them feedback and gauge when they will be ready to work on their own.

**Demonstrate a commitment to your employee's growth and progression.** Don't hold on too tightly to your talent. While most people will not be promoted every year or two, they do need to feel like you are providing them with steady growth and learning opportunities. Sometimes this might even mean supporting internal mobility. Give people the chance to move around, or move on, if it's the right next step for their careers. Your commitment to their growth will deepen the sense of trust between you and them.

**Create a culture of recognition.** Publicly recognizing the hard work and contributions of team members decreases feelings of stress and increases feelings of connection and belonging. Research has shown that companies with high-recognition cultures perform better and have less turnover than those that don't. This is, perhaps, because support and recognition make it easier for people to cope with the demands of work by showing them that their efforts are valued. Team meetings are a great time to call out exceptional performance. Unexpected gestures that communicate sincere appreciation can also be effective. If your employee closes a new client deal, for example, congratulate them publicly. Deloitte adds that if you can create a culture in which peers recognize and show gratitude to one another, your employees are more likely to stay happy and satisfied in their roles.

**Deepen engagement further by instilling a sense of purpose.** If the only thing motivating your team to go to work is a paycheck, their performance will suffer more than those who feel a sense of purpose in what they do. When employees connect the impact of their work back to the real world, daily tasks, which once seemed tedious, gain meaning. Start by making purpose a part of your business plan. Even if it's not declared in your mission statement, help your team understand by showing them the impact their work has both within the company, in other departments, as well as outside the organization, on society. You should also share your purpose during recruitment, and search for candidates that support it.

Burnout, and the consequences it reaps when unacknowledged, are detrimental to employee well-being and business performance. To battle this growing epidemic and create healthier work environments, leaders need to commit to changing what "workplace wellness" looks like. Let these steps guide you. If

you are successful, you will not just reduce worker stress. You will create a workforce with happier, more productive employees, and be a better business for it.

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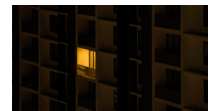
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