

# Keeping Burnout at Bay

There are remedies for overwhelmed and fatigued staff members that can actually benefit the entire company. *By DEAN CHURACK*

It takes a special breed of person to call clients and ask for money, and to do it over and over again. It's a task that's both adversarial in nature and involves repetitive efforts. While those credit and collection job characteristics are unavoidable, not everyone is fully aware of the impact on staff members. Of all the professionals that make up a media organization, these specialists are more prone to burnout than just about anyone.

The situation has been compounded in recent years by staff reductions and budget constraints – combined with the expectation that employees maintain the same, or often higher, levels of productivity. Those challenges make it crucial for managers to recognize when their staff is overwhelmed, and to have remedies to alleviate the stress.

## Heed the Warning Signs

Burnout often occurs among the hardest-working individuals in the department, as they are usually the ones going to the extra mile to get the job done. According to an article on JobDig.com written by Liz Bywater, president of the Bywater Consulting Group, the warning signals include reduced performance and productivity; increased irritability; quickness to argue with clients and coworkers; decreased creativity, as well as reduced energy and apathy.

There's a certain irony to the whole situation: when employees are expected to do more with less, it can often have an opposite effect. Not as much work gets done, which clearly ends up costing the organization more money. If the burned-out employee reaches the point of actually leaving the organization, there is the added cost of turnover and an even further loss of productivity.

It's important to let your staff know that if they are experiencing any of the symptoms associated with burnout, it is okay to speak with you about it. With unemployment running at all-time highs, employees may not be as willing to express any sort of dissatisfaction with their job for fear that they can be easily replaced by a long list of available candidates.

This shouldn't, however, keep managers from creating an environment that encourages candor, so long as they are able to differentiate between which employees truly are burned-out and need assistance and which ones might just be looking to take advantage of the situation. There's certainly a delicate balance in keeping two-way communications open while maintaining fairness in the department.

## Customize the Solutions

There are other ways to rekindle employees' energy and focus,

depending on a given company's size and resources. Not every organization has the ability to implement ideas like Facebook's new Hack-a-month program, which enables engineers to join a new team for a month and then go back to their regular positions.

Nor can they necessarily steal a page from Google's infamous 20% time initiative, which allows some employees to work one day a week on their own personal projects. These cutting-edge programs certainly

do a lot to quell burnout and foster an engaged workforce, but they are obviously not an option for most smaller-sized firms.

Credit and collection managers can, however, implement programs on a smaller scale that can have just as positive an effect. One of the easiest to incorporate is a cross-training program, which benefits both the individual and the department as a whole. Something as simple as learning a new task can create a sense of satisfaction and revitalization.

If your collectors are each assigned certain accounts by age of delinquency or by product or region, for example, try switching accounts around after a certain number of attempts, or at different intervals.

Fostering a sense of teamwork and letting staff in on some of the decision-making aspects of their job and the department's goals can also create a renewed sense of belonging and importance. There are myriad studies indicating workers' job satisfaction is often derived more from these intangibles than from a paycheck.

Ensuring that the members of your staff are maintaining work-life balance also will do wonders. Encourage daily breaks – from a lunch out with the department to a short pause that allows an employee to work on a personal project.

Taking a job-related class or attending a conference or seminar – such as MFMB/CCCA Media Finance Focus 2012, which takes place next May – adds variety to an employee's routine while benefiting the organization. Managers who cultivate an atmosphere where balance is a priority and open communications are endorsed can effectively keep employee burnout at bay.

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