The Burnout Challenge
THE BURNOUT CHALLENGE

Managing People’s Relationships with Their Jobs

Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter

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We dedicate this book to all those people who told us their stories, shared their experiences, answered our questions, and thus shone a bright light on burnout.
## Contents

| Introduction | 1 |
| PART I       | The Marathon |
| 1 Working in the Burnout Shop | 11 |
| 2 Sounding the Alarm | 32 |
| 3 Rethinking the Relationship between Person and Job | 61 |
| PART II      | The Mismatches |
| 4 Workload   | 85 |
| 5 Control    | 103 |
| 6 Rewards    | 116 |
| 7 Community  | 128 |
| 8 Fairness   | 144 |
| 9 Values     | 156 |
| PART III     | The Management |
| 10 Creating Better Matches | 173 |
| 11 Making Matches Work | 196 |
| 12 Meeting the Challenge of Burnout | 217 |
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix: Assessing Your Own Relationship with Work</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Burnout Challenge
Introduction

Across most of the twentieth century, in coal mines around the world, miners took caged canaries underground with them to test the air quality. The canary’s high sensitivity to carbon monoxide and other toxic gases meant that, if it swayed on its perch, or even collapsed, the coal miners were forewarned in sufficient time to get out.

The practice was ended by the 1990s, but to stretch the metaphor let’s say our hope was to keep more birds singing in mines. What would be our best approach? Should we try fixing the canary to make it stronger and more resilient—a tough old bird that could take whatever conditions it faced? Or should we fix the mine, clearing the toxic fumes and doing whatever else necessary to make it safe for canaries (and miners) to do their work?

In recent Gallup polls, majorities of American workers rate their jobs as mediocre or bad. Globally, the situation is even worse, with only 20 percent of employees reporting that they are engaged with their jobs. A recent study of British citizens found that, when they were working at their job, their happiness dropped around 8 percent relative to their average happiness in other life activities. The only
thing they associated with more unhappiness than working was being sick in bed.  

Apparently, for entirely too many people, work is an unpleasant place of cynicism and despair, and something to be endured rather than a source of satisfaction or pride. Our own research has included many conversations with a broad spectrum of workers about their workplaces. Here are comments representative of the discontent and frustration we’ve heard:

From a physician: “I gave 110 percent for many years only to find myself exhausted, bitter, and disillusioned. If I could do another profession with my medical degree, I would. I would advise my children to avoid medicine.”

From a tech worker: “I love my work. I am an avid learner and a very positive person. But I work in a socially toxic workplace. This is a highly political environment that encourages competition between colleagues, backstabbing, gossiping, and hiding information. I find going to work very difficult and I come home exhausted.”

From an engineer: “A large problem is that the company is always moving in new directions, and this is done in secret without receiving input from the professionals who actually perform the jobs. It makes us feel devalued when changes are made to a department or program, but the staff is never consulted or asked what could be done to improve their job.”

There is a paradox here. Organizations’ ideals and employees’ experiences are disconnected, even at odds with one another. At a time when leaders extol the virtues of respectful workplaces and engaging teamwork, complaints of incivility, abuse, and bullying run rampant. Even as consultants and managers incessantly beat the
Introduction

drum of engagement, dissatisfaction remains an intense concern, including in the professions offering the greatest possibilities for vibrant, dedicated, absorbing work. Everywhere, there are thoughtful leaders deeply concerned with helping their employees be productive, fulfilled, and healthy—and there is proof that some of what they do makes a difference. But the evidence also shows that, all too often, their efforts fall short of the mark.

Various social, political, and economic factors have shaped the work environment such that many jobs are increasingly stressful. Competitive pressures to cut costs and increase profits have resulted in downsizing, for example, leaving smaller staffs to manage the same workloads. In some sectors, changing public policies—and in health care, the rise of managed care—have strongly affected what customer-facing workers can provide and what they cannot. For many kinds of work, real wages have declined, and job benefits have been cut back. The result is a fundamental contradiction in the workplaces of the twenty-first century. On the one hand, organizations increasingly need the creativity and involvement of their employees. On the other hand, organizations have made changes that undermine people’s capacity to be engaged in their work.

Burnout

The negative impact of these workplace trends creates an employee experience of a crushing exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and alienation, and a sense of ineffectiveness—the triumvirate known as burnout. The burnout syndrome occurs when people experience combined crises on all three of these dimensions, most of the time. They feel chronically exhausted; they have withdrawn mentally, socially, and emotionally from their work; and they have lost confidence in their capacity to have a constructive impact. Basically, this means that they are experiencing high stress, a hostile job environment, and a pessimistic evaluation of themselves. Burnout is an apt
term, suggesting a once-hot fire that has been reduced to ashes: those ashes are the feelings of exhaustion and a lack of engagement left after an initial, internal flame of dedication and passion is extinguished. The accelerants are the workplace conditions creating too-hot environments and leaving behind this trifecta with its scorching effects on people’s lives.

Burnout is also not a new term. Indeed, it has been part of the popular vocabulary for the better part of a century, and perhaps even longer. (Google’s Ngram viewer charts its rise from a starting point in the 1820s.) The concept of the human stress response to difficult life events (stressors) was developed in the 1950s. Before then, burnout (or burn-out) was most commonly used in engineering to describe the result when repetitive stress or excessive load on a piece of equipment ruins its ability to function (as when a motor, or light bulb, or rocket booster burns out). Perhaps the engineering use of the term was why its application to workplaces took off in Silicon Valley, where early start-up ventures were referred to as “burnout shops.” But burnout also became a slang word for a chronic drug abuser and resonated with the idea of “burning the candle at both ends.” Graham Greene called his 1961 novel about an architect in a state of spiritual crisis and disillusionment A Burnt-Out Case.

By the 1970s, workers in various realms of health and human services were using burnout to describe their own job crisis. One of us (Maslach), conducting interviews with such workers for a research project, heard the term repeatedly along with the stories behind it—and soon shifted the project to focus on burnout instead. She collaborated with Susan Jackson in 1981 to publish the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), an instrument for assessing the experience. Then the two of us (Leiter and Maslach) joined forces on three lines of work: developing additional versions of that measurement tool and a new one, the Areas of Worklife Survey (AWS); conducting research studies on burnout with international colleagues;
Introduction

and writing our first book on burnout. Since the latter came out in 1997, we have conducted studies in numerous organizations, tracking the development of job burnout, finding ways of reversing it, and nudging people toward engagement instead. Clearly, understanding burnout has been a major focus of our lives’ work. In this book, we pull all of it together into an integrated perspective on burnout and what to do about it.

In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized burnout as a legitimate occupational phenomenon that could have a negative impact on the well-being of workers in the workplace. In its words:

Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.

It is characterized by three dimensions:

- feelings of energy depletion, or exhaustion.
- increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job.
- reduced professional efficacy.

The year after WHO recognized burnout as a legitimate occupational phenomenon, the coronavirus disease—abbreviated as Covid-19—forced the closure of many workplaces, including offices, schools, restaurants, food-processing facilities, and more. Starting in early 2020, the pandemic caused many people to experience dramatic changes in their job, often with no warning or preparation—just think of the healthcare workers whose workload increased with the onslaught of Covid patients, or the teachers suddenly educating students online rather than in person. Other people had to deal with the uncertainty of cutbacks in their organizations, and risks of losing their jobs entirely.
We already knew that, when workplaces are designed mostly for the economic bottom line, they may miss the mark on the human one, and that they can actually be bad for the people who work within them. Many decades of research on various risk factors in the workplace (such as high demands, toxic hazards, job insecurity, lack of control, and so on) have shown that unhealthy job environments harm employees both physically and mentally, with ultimate damage to the economic bottom line. The pandemic added even more risk factors to this equation—such as working too close to other people, for longer hours, in enclosed spaces.

During the pandemic people were using the term burned out colloquially to describe feeling stressed. Doing so does not question burnout’s research-based definition, any more than people saying colloquially that they are depressed challenges the reality that depression is a clinically diagnosable condition. But it was in the midst of this challenging time that we felt, more than ever, that we needed to share a deeper understanding of burnout and how to combat it, based on decades of research and analysis of data.

Mismatches in the Workplace

We believe burnout arises from the increasing mismatch between workers and workplaces. As the WHO definition explains, the occupational phenomenon of burnout is the result when chronic workplace stressors have “not been successfully managed.” If conditions and requirements set by a workplace are out of sync with the needs of people who work there, this bad fit in the person–job relationship will cause both to suffer. Our research has identified at least six forms of mismatch that can exist between a job and the person holding it:

- work overload
- lack of control
- insufficient rewards
Introduction

- breakdown of community
- absence of fairness
- value conflicts

Poor alignment in any one of these six areas increases the risk of burnout. For example, let’s consider work overload. If job demands cannot be met within the usual workday, then employees have to work extra hours and take time away from other important parts of their lives (such as personal interests, family and friends, and sleep). We’ve found that these bad mismatches often have their roots in erroneous assumptions about what makes people tick—what motivates them, what rewards them, and what discourages them. In other words, there is often a misunderstanding of basic psychology. The more that any or all of these six conditions depart from employees’ aspirations or preferred ways of working, the more employees are vulnerable to burnout.

In the chapters that follow we detail these six mismatches—what they are, why they have such a toxic effect, and how to fix them and achieve better matches between the job and the person. If mismatches can be corrected or improved, then there are ways to prevent burnout and promote greater engagement with work.

The analogy we began with of the canary in the coal mine is an apt one for understanding the burnout experience, because it focuses our attention on three critical things: the individual, the context, and the relationship between them. If the individual canary is noticeably suffering within the context of the mine, it is a red-flag warning that the context has problems—that will affect not only the canary, but any other individuals working there. One could say that the relationship between the canary and the coal mine represents a serious mismatch between the individual (with its need for oxygen) and the workplace (with its carbon monoxide–filled air). What can be done, for the individual and the workplace, to fix the relationship between them, so that work can be done safely? The answers lie in the pages to follow.
PART I

The Marathon
Working in the Burnout Shop

Calling a business a “burnout shop” was a popular phrase in the early days of Silicon Valley. It was an exciting time in the tech boom. New start-ups were formed, money was flowing, and companies needed to hire workers. Companies’ want ads even bragged about their reputations as burnout shops. The hours would be long (the concept of 24/7 was invented here), the work would be challenging, and everyone would have to sacrifice a lot of their personal lives for this particular quest. After a few years, employees would burn out—but even if they were unable to work anymore, they would leave with some promising stock options in a fledgling business.

Working in the burnout shop was like an all-out sprint, with people going as fast as they could under extreme conditions.

What characterizes the burnout shop of today? To put it simply, the sprint is now a fast-paced marathon. The short-term strategy of self-sacrifice and speed has become the long-term operating model for many businesses. As one consultant put it, “Everyone’s job is now an extreme job.”1 But running at a sprint pace cannot be sustained over a long period; it leads to debilitating consequences such as ongoing stress experiences, physical exhaustion, sleep deprivation, poor job performance, and disruptions of personal and family life. The mismatches between people and their jobs have been getting even worse.
Workplace Stressors

Some might say that dealing with stress is a common part of everyday life, whether at work or home or anywhere else. So what is the problem here? Just what goes on in burnout shops that makes them especially stressful? The answer lies in two characteristics of the stressors they commonly present. First, a workplace stressor typically involves a serious mismatch (or imbalance, or bad fit) between the person and the job. Second, the stressor is chronic—it causes stress repeatedly, perhaps every day, for reasons that are difficult to change. Chronic stressors take more of a physical and psychological toll on people than do occasional stressors (such as unanticipated challenges or emergencies, when everyone must jump in to do more than usual to fix the situation). When chronic stressors also involve mismatches, the result is erosion—a wearing-away of one’s ability to cope effectively, to be involved in one’s work, and to take pride in one’s achievements. These everyday stressors may be little things, such as rude or sarcastic comments from fellow workers, or bureaucratic processes that are tedious or disruptive, but their erosive effect over time can be considerable. Six chronic mismatches in particular combine to shape the characteristic features of the burnout coal mine.

WORK OVERLOAD

The burnout shop is an “always-on” work culture, where job demands are high and continue to keep piling up, and resources necessary to meet those demands (such as time, tools, goals, support) are often insufficient. In many of today’s companies, the explicit directive to “do more with less” is demoralizing and confusing, and
undermines employees’ energy, involvement, and competence. It is no surprise that many people compare this experience to that of Sisyphus, the Greek mythological character who was condemned for eternity to push a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down just before it reached the top. Despite their hard work, people are not sure they are making any meaningful progress.

In many cases, increasing workloads demand people’s efforts beyond the traditional boundaries of work hours. If the work cannot get done on time in the workplace, then employees may have to work overtime, or take work home to finish it there, or even take on extra job tasks to get the project completed. In other words, “Overwork happens.” A culture of working long hours assumes that productivity rises when salaried employees spend more time at work—especially as “people deliver under pressure.” There is not, however, much support for this assumption. Instead, much evidence shows links between working long hours and illness, as well as lower productivity.²

Especially dispiriting to people is having their plate overfilled with tasks that are not a match for their capability level and that do not contribute to their strengths at performing the job they were hired to do. In medicine, for example, physicians have invested heavily to gain their expertise and are most happy working extra hours if they are “working at the top of their license”—that is, performing the highest-level services they are qualified to render. Administrative busy work—like populating electronic medical records—is bottom-of-the-license work. Tasks like this, and equivalents in other jobs—like generating reports that no one reads and completing online training modules unrelated to one’s work—fall into the category of “illegitimate tasks” that people resent doing.³ Workers are required to accomplish these tasks within regular work hours, but they experience them as a burden, or a drain on the time and energy that they could be devoting to more important work. An irony comes when managers (who normally champion
an on-task focus) must enforce policies that divert employees’ finite energy to trivia.

For many, the workday is stretched further by a commute that keeps getting longer. Housing close to urban workplaces has become increasingly expensive while wage stagnation has constrained the amount of money people have available for housing. Housing prices outstrip the capacity of people to pay because urban properties have become investment vehicles supported by vast pools of wealth searching for attractive returns on investment. Housing supply remains tight due to zoning constraints in many places. Across a recent five-year period, the number of “super-commuters” (those commuting more than ninety minutes each way) rose by 40 percent in ten US states. That time feels more like “work” than leisure, and people are not getting paid for it.

This expanding workload often comes with personal costs, as reflected in oft-heard complaints like “no work-life balance is fostered,” and “unpaid overtime is expected.” Employees may be reluctant to say no to requests to do extra work because they fear they might not be promoted, or might be demoted or shut out of opportunities, or might even lose their jobs. Feeling they have to work more hours, even when “off-duty,” puts strain on their personal lives. It erodes their relationships with family and friends, and harms their health and well-being. As one hospital worker we know told us, “There is a culture of high stress in our department due to high workload, which results in a constant high anxiety and low mood. This impacts staff morale. The level of high stress and anxiety for me personally has resulted in significantly high levels of sick leave for myself, and high medical bills. I have been thinking about leaving the workplace as a result.”

The boundary between work and home was greatly eroded during the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced many people to “work from home” rather than leave their home to do their job in another place. The hours devoted to their jobs—as opposed to the rest of
their lives—became blurry, in terms of both the numbers of hours and when they took place during the day or night. There were reports of people devoting even more hours to work when they were at home than when they had been in the workplace. For some, this was a response to a period when they saw others losing jobs. As the pandemic wore on, people were more afraid for their own livelihoods and worked harder to stay employed.

Workload is not just about hours, however. An even more important aspect can be the emotional burden involved. This is especially true for healthcare and human services providers, as well as first responders, who deal with patients and clients under very emotionally stressful conditions. The emotional labor inherent in such work can intensify especially when caseloads expand. This burden became overwhelming during the pandemic, when healthcare workers faced the need to care for huge numbers of severely ill Covid-19 patients while trying to avoid getting sick themselves and bringing illness home to their families. Some had the heartbreaking experience of keeping families away from loved ones and being the only people with suffering patients when they died. Many doctors, nurses, and others who have worked many years in health care have said that they have never felt so burned out in their lives.

This speaks to another factor contributing to a work overload mismatch beyond sheer volume of work and its emotional toll: a heavy workload is more exhausting when someone does not have the capacity or opportunity to recover and bounce back. Without effective, ongoing recovery processes, people only become increasingly tired, worn out, and unenthusiastic about going back to the job the next day. An executive coach we know works with high-tech leaders under enormous pressure at their companies. “Good athletes,” he observes, “have learned how to turn on their stress hormones and respond when they absolutely have to, then release and relax. But in Silicon Valley, the stress response is turned on all the time, even when stress is not there.”
The burnout shop is often characterized by problems in power dynamics, such as micromanagement, incompetent leadership, and ineffective teams. Too often, people are denied the necessary autonomy to do their jobs well, sometimes by being excluded from critical decisions relevant to their work. Feeling ignored, limited, manipulated, distrusted, and undermined brings greater uncertainty and frustration to their daily work-lives. People feel fear and anxiety about doing their work correctly and potentially being punished (even demoted or fired) for getting things wrong. At the same time, they feel angry, resentful, and alienated being constantly second-guessed, overruled, and shut out of any efforts to improve or innovate. Workers who do not have an appropriate amount of autonomy over the work they do, who are unable to make choices and exercise discretion to do it well, simply do not feel effective in their jobs.

Also constraining and limiting individuals’ control and options are often situational factors. For example, in occupations focused on direct interaction with clients or patients, the sheer number of people with whom an employee must engage can be overwhelming. When the patient or client load becomes too great, quantity compromises quality. People no longer have the option to provide the level of service or treatment they would choose to render—especially as time limits tend to be imposed, such as “no more than fifteen minutes per person.” As the attention and effort allowed for each case is minimized, workers can succumb to callous, even cynical, “processing” of clients or patients. Consider the situation of lawyers doing legal-aid work. “I have so often seen good, competent lawyers begin to process people like machines, rarely doing more than
placing their problem into a category to be recorded and mechanically dealt with,” one worker reports. “I have watched the same attorneys lose their enthusiasm, their creativity, and their commitment. People are dealt with and described in statistical terms, in general rather than in particular, and as part of a stream of problems rather than as human beings.”

Health care is famously a profession in which high patient loads, along with stepped-up requirements for digital record-keeping, have left many physicians feeling like mere cogs in a machine over which they have no control. Educators also tend to be responsible for many people, at all levels from elementary schools to universities. One college instructor described how heavy workload translates to diminished autonomy: “The experience of burnout is different from simply feeling fatigued or exhausted; it typically stems from a lack of perceived control that leads people to feel overwhelmed and ‘at the end of their rope.”

Beyond autonomy in specific job tasks, workers also want to feel they have control over their schedules and earnings—and many have lost ground here, too. Even if they have agreed to work extra hours, they may find themselves unable to take compensatory time off to regain the personal time they lost. Wanting the predictability of a reliable schedule, some instead see their (and their family members’) lives disrupted by work hours that shift from week to week, or by needs to respond to unanticipated work needs on short notice. For many, the unsettling sense of not being in control of income and work hours was greatly exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Where workers feel a lack of autonomy, often that sense is a relative one—a contrast with a level of independence they used to have—and often the culprit is a new manager. After a restructuring of a hospital’s organization took place, an employee complained about the rising burnout on her team: “This is not a gripe about that restructure—however, it is a reflection on how this
individual chooses to manage the team, ignoring the way the team prefers to work, which is predominantly fixed in a culture of respect, authenticity, and collaboration. The new manager’s style does not allow for this collaboration, autonomy, or freedom—nor is there allowance for diversity of thought, or the space for error or disagreement.” She described the dispiriting atmosphere the team now experienced: “What prevails is an autocratic do as I tell you, divide-and-conquer mentality. Every aspect of the work is micro-managed, and the person spends hours reworking the written work done by team members or others in the organization, and even those external to the organization.” Clearly, bosses in organizations have power invested in their positions and are expected to exercise authority, but if the manner in which they do this creates chronic feelings of lack of control, they not only damage efficacy but also engender cynicism. Their actions signal a lack of faith that others around them believe in the organization’s mission and know how to advance it.

INSUFFICIENT REWARDS

In burnout shops, people often feel they are not reaping sufficient rewards—financially, socially, or emotionally—for the hard and high-quality work they are doing. Of course, for many, the most important rewards are the intrinsic ones that come with making progress in meaningful and challenging work. They become frustrated and depressed to the extent that their jobs bog them down in trivial tasks and discouraging cases or projects. But extrinsic rewards matter, too, and many experience their pay as too low, benefits as too few, and promotions as too infrequent. They feel unrecognized and underappreciated, believing their accomplishments are routinely ignored, even when they have gone above and beyond
what was needed. Positive feedback is rare, while negative feedback may be plentiful. Indeed, when asked to describe “a good day” on the job, many workers reply, “When nothing bad happens.” Evidently, having “something good happen” is too rare or unreasonable to expect. Living with such a low standard for one’s daily experience reflects frustration and disappointment, and provides little motivation to do one’s best work.

Sometimes to provide a desirable reward an organization decides to set up a contest, or generally promote rivalry among the staff, on the assumption that competition will motivate everyone to work harder and better. Competition, however, also sends other messages. One is that employees succeed by defeating each other, which prioritizes individual gain over collective benefit. Another message is that there can be only one winner and all others are, by definition, losers. As an example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, most schools and colleges switched from teaching students in person to teaching them online. This unexpected change had to be enacted instantly, which called for enormous efforts by course instructors to quickly revamp their teaching methods, become adept in using unfamiliar technologies, and learn how to deal with students attending classes and taking tests remotely. It was a huge challenge that required long hours and hard work to maintain teaching excellence and deliver it successfully. At one school, instructors received an announcement requesting their nominations for a set of distinguished teaching awards during the pandemic. This attempt to name a few among them as “best” was not well received. “Why can't the school do something that recognizes all of us,” one asked, “like a letter of thanks or some small gift of appreciation? Why does recognition have to be a competition, which will leave a lot of us with bad feelings, because we are not as valued?”

At times, social rewards are lacking simply because people are so overloaded by work that they forget to give positive feedback or to thank each other for working longer and harder. In some settings,
however, their absence reflects a mistaken belief that the best way to motivate people is with negative reprimands, penalties, and punishments. In fact, positive reinforcement can be far more effective.\textsuperscript{7}

**BREAKDOWN OF COMMUNITY**

In burnout shops, the always-on culture of fear is particularly damaging when it poisons people’s relationships with their coworkers. Instead of viewing their colleagues as supportive and trustworthy, people may come to suspect that they are surrounded by people “only in it for themselves” and willing to do anything to get ahead. Under such conditions, they do not seek out advice or help, lest they reveal a weakness that could be used against them. Thus, work environments allegedly designed to win the race to success and innovation can actually undermine the effective collaboration and teamwork required for these. The system pushes people toward their worst behaviors—selfish actions at the expense of others’ well-being and the organization’s mission.

Any workplace can be vulnerable to the bad behaviors that take place in the society around it. Workers can be targeted, for example, by racist and sexist remarks if their colleagues harbor such prejudices. But the always-on intensity and exhaustion of burnout shops make it more likely that antisocial behaviors will erupt, go unchecked, and lead to community breakdown. These behaviors can occur at all employee levels of the organization. Sometimes they occur between team members, or among staff with similar jobs or positions—and they often involve things like name-calling, making sarcastic remarks, talking behind a colleague’s back, or trying to belittle or intimidate one’s colleagues. Such behavior among peers has
Index

acceptance, civility and, 131
accommodation, civility and, 132
acknowledgment, civility and, 131
action, respect and, 145
affective climate of social setting, 119
agenda, redesigning to improve matches as item on, 193
aid workers in a foreign country, lack of boundary between work and home, 98
airline cockpit, design of, 63, 187–188
Alphabet, corporate code of conduct, 161
Alphabet Workers Union, 161
American Psychiatric Association, on burnout, 40–41
Americans, rating of own jobs, 1
anger, lack of fairness and, 145
Apollo space program, 163
appreciation, 118–119; civility and, 131–132; showing in the workplace, 221
Areas of Worklife Survey (AWS), 4, 150, 154, 179
aspirational urgency, 199
“Assessing Your Relationship with Work,” 179–180, 235–238
attributions, person-only focus and, 67
authority, managerial, 18, 87, 104, 109, 115, 152
autonomy: civility and, 136; control and, 107–111, 181; as intrinsic reward, 124; lack of, 16–18; person-job match and, 64–65; rewards and, 117; trust and, 164; workload matches and, 181; in the workplace, 107–108
awareness, civility and, 131
balance, redesign of better matches and, 189
balance on the job, 87, 91–95
behavior, bad workplace, 20–22
belonging: civility and, 136; community and, 128–129, 181; as intrinsic reward, 124; rewards and, 117; social support and sense of, 139
belongingness: fairness and sense of, 153–154; person-job match and, 65
benefits, cafeteria approaches to, 149–150.
See also rewards
bias, sense of fairness and systematic, 23
boundaries between work and nonwork, 14–15, 87, 95–99
boundary conditions, equal outcomes and, 149
British citizens’ ratings of jobs, 1–2
“Bullying and Harassment in the Health Sector” (Australian government report), 205
bullying in the workplace, 22, 133
burnout: chronic nature of, 35; civility / incivility and, 136; components of, 3; consequences of, 35–36; coping strategies for, 39–40; defined, 5, 6, 27–28, 40, 73, 217–218; dimensions of the work experience and, 51–52; focus on individual and, 7, 36–40, 59–60, 66–73, 196–197; focus on situational context and, 59–60; healthcare providers and, 57; individual change and, 220–221; individual coping techniques, 47–51; medicalization of, 39–47; mismatch between employee and job / workplace and, 6–7, 61–62 (see also person–job mismatches); organizational processes and prevention of, 93; overview, 3–6; pandemic and new variants of, 98–99; red-flag signals of, 32–33; reducing incivility and preventing, 137–138; as social phenomenon, 232–233; stigma associated with, 36, 43; test for, 42–47; workplace change and, 221–224
burnout dimensions, assessing changes in, 214–215
burnout profile, 53; alleviating, 184–185; percentage of workforce that fits, 53; values and, 157
“burnout shops,” 4, 11, 15; culture of fear and, 20, 36–37
burnout tests, ethical concerns about, 43–45
A Burnt-Out Case (Greene), 4
business hours, expansion of definition of, 96
canary in a coal mine metaphor, 1, 7, 39–40; mismatches and, 31, 32
capability dimension of job, 26, 27–28
capability domain, of job-person match, 218
causal attributions, person-only focus and, 67
caution in admitting difficulties at work, 221
change, flexibility and willingness to, 112
change strategy, to improve person-job matches, 77–78
changing workplace, understanding process may be difficult, 182
China, 996 culture in, 86, 92
chronic nature of job demands, distressed work experience and, 68
chronic stressors, 12
civility, 130–133; actions defining in the workplace, 131–132; assessing changes in, 213; managing workplace, 133–138; modeling, 221; ratio of incivility to, 137. See also incivility; Strengthening a Culture of Respect and Engagement (SCORE)
clutter, subtracting sources of, 94
ccoal mines, canaries in as metaphor for burnout in the workplace, 1, 7
cockpit design, 63, 187–188
collaboration: among people affected by workplace conditions, 100–101; in making positive change in the job environment, 80–81, 174–175, 215–216
collaborative workplace interventions, success and, 201–202
community, 128–143; belonging and, 128–129; breakdown of, 7, 20–22; civility and, 130–133; job balance and, 95; managing workplace civility, 133–138; mutual respect and, 130; recognition and stronger sense of, 124–126; social dimension of work and, 26, 218; social support and, 138–143; workplace culture and, 128–129; workplace identity and, 129–130