Burnout Revisited: Six Cultural Factors to Consider

Rebecca Pope-Ruark ▪ October 17, 2022

Earlier this year, I argued that leaders need to understand faculty burnout on multiple levels and be willing to take actions that support the faculty writ large, not just individuals already coping with burnout personally. Doing so means both recognizing and going beyond the basic definitions and looking more deeply into the features of institutions and higher ed itself. We know that the World Health Organization defined burnout as a syndrome caused by chronic workplace stress that cannot be sufficiently managed and that is characterized by three specific 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," and "reduced professional efficacy."

But the most important thing we must realize about burnout is that it is not an individual problem that affects a workplace: it's a workplace culture problem that affects individuals. Much of what has been written about burnout in higher ed, some of my own work included, focuses on individual coping strategies and ignores the cultural foundation of the syndrome. In this piece, I'd like to explore some cultural features of the workplace that 40 years of organizational research have shown to foment burnout.

Leading burnout researchers Michael P. Leiter and Christina Maslach, whose Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) has been the primary research instrument for measuring occupational burnout since 1981, posited that there are six primary areas of work-life misalignment in cultures that foster burnout; these can easily fit with the ways institutions of higher education function:

1. **Workload.** When workload exceeds the opportunity and ability to recover from the ongoing associated stress, people more easily succumb to the first characteristic of burnout: exhaustion. As someone who coaches faculty members on productivity and time and project management and has experienced productivity-driven burnout firsthand, I regularly see the typical workload of an active, productive faculty member exceed what that person can reasonably manage. Many of those faculty come to me with confusion or even shame, wondering why "everyone" around them seems to be managing just fine when they cannot keep up with the grading, grant deadlines, committee deliverables, and mentoring responsibilities that hang over their heads. The chronic stress of this type of workload can easily lead to burnout.

2. **Control.** When multiple external sources make demands on their time and attention, it can be difficult for faculty to feel like they have control over their time and focus. This might confound faculty who see or saw academic work as the ultimate self-driven occupation. Faculty do (seem to) have a great deal of unscheduled time compared to the average corporate worker, but the demands on that time regularly if not always exceed time available, leaving faculty feeling disconnected from their own goals and priorities and driven solely by the pressure to keep up with external demands. When a faculty member feels they have little control over their workload or time, negativism and cynicism can creep in, affecting their view of their work and its importance.

3. **Reward.** Across industries, professional reward can be financial or social or involve professional recognition or external validation. But in higher ed, the path to reward may strike faculty as more fraught than in nonacademic workplaces. For example, state budgets dictate salaries at public institutions, limiting or precluding raises; granting agencies govern research money awards, never guaranteeing future work opportunities; students control end-of-course evaluation scores, despite the research showing bias against women and minoritized faculty; and colleges and universities may lack transparent standards for tenure and promotion, causing years of worry and questioning. In a recent conversation in a workshop I led, a group of faculty members shared how meaningful small recognitions are as rewards, but when the culture values criticism over connection, those rewards are few and far between. Without some sense of reward, all three characteristics of burnout can manifest.

4. **Community.** Community in higher ed can be a catch-22. On one hand, we are told to love our institutions and find connection through that affiliation. On the other, we are constantly judging or being judged by others, especially colleagues, whether for promotion, publication, grant funding, or even the success of our courses. It can be difficult to form social bonds when competition is a primary feature of the culture. When faculty feel they cannot relax or trust each

other within the institutional or disciplinary culture, it can be easy to fall into cynicism and doubt one's professional efficacy.

5. **Fairness.** Fairness connects to workload, reward, and community, and when conditions seem consistently unfair, burnout can breed. At public institutions, for example, salaries are public record, clearly showing imbalances across disciplines, ranks, gender, and minoritized status and leading to discontent. Institutions may treat faculty who bring in massive grants much differently from faculty responsible for the lion's share of undergraduate teaching, undermining community. Workload unfairness can also be exhausting as the "curse of competence" and imbalance of emotional labor requested of women and minority faculty come into play: people who are willing (or feel obligated) to take more work on and do it well will be asked to do more and more, while those who refuse or do the work poorly are rewarded with less work. These are conditions ripe for the exhaustion and cynicism dimensions of burnout.

6. **Values.** In *Unraveling Faculty Burnout: Pathways to Reckoning and Renewal*, I write about the stated and enacted values of higher ed, ranging from the compelling commitments to lifelong learning and knowledge creation to the devotion to competition, productivity at all costs, and doing more with less. When institutional values and goals do not align with faculty realities, burnout ensues. Value congruence is a primary driver of employee commitment, and when values are out of whack, workload is overwhelming, reward little, and fairness questionable, faculty begin to question not only their roles at the institution but also higher ed in general, as we've seen during the Great Resignation.

When you read these misalignments and think about your institution's culture, where might the most serious misalignments occur? Given what your faculty are telling or showing you, where are areas ripe for real change, and what might steps toward that change look like? When we remember that burnout is a culture problem, not an individual one, exploring these areas for change with your faculty becomes crucial for community and future success.

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