

Low Staff Morale & Burnout: Causes & Solutions

Chungsup Lee | Jarrod Scheunemann | Robin Hall | Laura Payne



Staff Morale & Burnout: Prevention and Possible Solutions

Authors & Contributors:

Chungsup Lee
Research Assistant
Office of Recreation & Park Resources
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Jarrod Scheunemann
Community Services & Education Coordinator
Office of Recreation & Park Resources
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Robin Hall
Director
Office of Recreation & Park Resources
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Laura L. Payne Ph.D.
Extension Specialist
Office of Recreation & Park Resources
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

THE OFFICE OF RECREATION & PARK RESOURCES

Since 1969, the Office of Recreation & Park Resources (ORPR) has become the principal link between the University of Illinois, the Department of Recreation, Sport & Tourism, and the communities of Illinois in the field of parks and recreation.

The activities of ORPR are carried out through a multi-method approach that includes applied research, workshops and seminars, teaching, preparation and dissemination of informational materials, community visits and consultations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Staff morale and burnout	1
What is burnout?.....	1
Possible determinants of burnout	2
Approaches to combat burnout	4
What is staff morale?	5
Causes behind low staff morale	6
Approaches to combat low staff morale	7
Conclusion	9
References.....	11

Introduction

As the State of Illinois continues to face an economic downturn, agencies in the community park and recreation field are required to do more with fewer resources. Naturally, the heaviest burden is placed on the park and recreation staff. For example, staff size is being reduced, causing longer workdays, fewer opportunities to recharge and relax and greater responsibilities for the remaining employees. Ultimately, these changes in the workplace dynamic could cause reductions in staff morale and an increase in burnout in a normally bright and happy workforce. Therefore, in this paper, the Office of Recreation & Park Resources (ORPR) will highlight research that explains the trends/issues of low staff morale and burnout and suggest options for coping with difficult and stressful work environments.

Staff burn out and morale

What is burnout?

The term “burnout” first appeared in the 1970s, was most prevalent among human services professionals (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998), and generally refers to professionals who focus on improving the quality of life of the individuals and communities they serve (National Organization for Human Services, 2009). Staff burnout is defined as “a condition of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people in some capacity” (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996, p. 4). To gain a better understanding of staff burnout, we need to look at the definition more closely. Three syndromes are mentioned in the definition of staff burnout, which are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and

reduced personal accomplishment. To begin, emotional exhaustion refers to the energy discharge of emotional resources, which is considered the keystone of staff burnout. Secondly, depersonalization can be explained as people behaving with a “cold” heart or an indifferent attitude. Finally, reduced personal accomplishment is the tendency to devalue one’s work, which leads to a negative self-assessment (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996).

According to researchers, staff burnout could lead to the following adverse effects in the work setting: higher rates of illness, lower staff morale, increased use of alcohol and drugs, lower career satisfaction, high staff turnover, reduced quality of service, and poor customer outcomes (Barnett, Brennan & Gareis, 1999; Maslach & Jackson, 1986; Moore & Cooper, 1996). Furthermore, staff burnout can influence the psychological health of staff. For example, Hegarty (1987) conducted a case study on British staff workers who served community members with learning disabilities. One staff worker stated that she needed to leave her work and enter psychotherapy to treat her own health because of staff burnout. It is also important to note that staff burnout does not apply to only one specific work class (e.g., operations, recreation, parks, administration, seasonal). Caton et al (1988) measured the burnout of four different staff groups (i.e., professional staff, direct care staff, educational development assistants and support staff) and they found the level of burnout among all of these groups to be at moderate or high levels.

Possible determinants of burnout

We have defined what staff burnout is; now we investigate the causes behind it. The causes of burnout can be classified into four factors (Borritz, 2006). The first factor

can be explained through differences at the personal level. This factor includes situational and personal influences that may lead to burnout, such as personality, over-commitment and setting unrealistic job expectations (Beasley, Thompson, & Davidson, 2003; Pines & Aronson, 1988). Secondly, burnout may occur at the interpersonal level. The most representative example of this is when employee's resources become unbalanced with the client's demands (Maslach, 1993). Generally, organizations may look at it as a good thing when clients' demands exceed employee's resources, since it would create the opportunity to learn, improve and increase sales (Ulrich, 1997). However, when client demands exceed the employee's resources, this may lead to staff apathy, causing them to feel like they cannot do anything about it. Thirdly, staff burnout may be a result of organizational factors. Organizational factors have been developed in the field fairly recently compared to the individual and interpersonal factors (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). Organizational factors are based upon the perception of the level of respect that employees receive from the organization in which they work (Ramarajan & Barsade, 2006). According to Grandey (2003), emotional exhaustion may be caused by the perceived need of employees to disguise their feelings of disrespect for their employer to their clients. The final reason for burnout stems from a slightly different concept called emotional labor. It refers to the process by which workers are expected to manage their feelings in accordance with organizationally defined rules and guidelines (Hochschild, 1993). The expenditure of emotional labor is especially critical in the human services profession, since staff have a high frequency of interaction with coworkers, community members and patrons; they need not only use physical labor, but also emotional labor. Therefore, this could easily cause staff to become emotionally exhausted.

Approaches to combat burnout

As expected, staff burnout is a complex problem. Due to its complexity, researchers have suggested diverse approaches to solving this problem. The first approach to combat burnout is called problem-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is a way of changing the sources of the stressors or altering elements of the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, it is also called active coping, since it seeks to directly cope with the actual problem. This coping approach includes seeking advice, discussing issues with others, and increased emphasis on time management (Bond, 1986; Royal College of Nursing, 2005). By using this coping strategy, employees attempt to increase their perceived control of the situation. When one feels like the situation is under control, he or she tends to find solutions to problems easier and displays lower levels of burnout (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Another approach is called emotional-focused coping. In contrast to problem-focused strategy, this approach is closely related to the passive coping strategy. This is because it does not attempt to solve the problem itself, but instead focuses on managing the emotional response to the problem. For example, avoidance or self-blaming, escapism, reflection, and talking to therapists are components of an emotional-focused coping strategy (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pau et al, 2004). Since this strategy does not solve the problem itself, there is a possibility that burnout will return if personnel focus on avoidance.

Another coping strategy for facing burnout is called relationship-focused coping. The goal of this is to manage, regulate or preserve relationships during stressful periods

(O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996). In other words, staff will focus on building and solidifying their relationships first through the belief that a healthy relationship will reduce conflict, aid in understanding differing perspectives and help in problem solving. This strategy includes empathy, compromise, withdrawal, ignoring and support provision (Kramer, 1993). It may be a useful approach for human service professionals, since they need to manage clients most of time and the relationship between clients and workers is crucial to organizational success.

The final coping strategy is called lifestyle-coping. Many researchers have emphasized the relationship between lifestyles and burnout (Espeland, 2006; Leighton & Roye, 1984; Maslach, 2003; Nororoian & Yasko, 1982; Shubin, 1978). They believe healthy lifestyles improve well-being, which leads to the mitigation of burnout. These healthy lifestyle strategies include diet, exercise, relaxation and refreshing oneself using techniques that would work on an individual basis, such as taking a hot bath after a stressful day, changing into favorite clothing, meditation, massage and enjoying a favorite leisure activity (Espeland, 2006; Leighton & Roye, 1984; Maslach, 2003; Nororoian & Yasko, 1982; Shubin, 1978).

What is staff morale?

Besides burnout, many researchers consider staff morale to be another delicate issue that affects job performance (Analoui, 2000; Chambers, 1996; Cox, 2001; Rauktis & Koeske, 1994). Researchers have defined morale in many ways. Among the definitions, McKnight, Ahmad and Schroeder (2001) describe it as “the degree to which an employee feels good about his/her work and work environment” (p.467). Moreover,

the factors that help to define morale are intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, work meaningfulness, organizational commitment and work pride (McKnight, Ahmad & Schroeder, 2001).

Causes behind low staff morale

Since staff morale is related to how staff feel about the organization, it is an important factor in creating a healthy work environment. A study by Millett (2010) listed six reasons why high staff morale is important. Organizations that incorporated these six concepts displayed a higher staff morale culture and noticed improved productivity, improved performance and creativity, reduced number of days taken for leave, higher attention to detail, a safer workplace, and an increased quality of work. In addition to that, Mazin (2010) found that agencies with higher morale have more staff who arrive to work on time, communicate better, waste less time on gossip, have higher rates of recruitment and retention, and are more creative. Moreover, Fard, Ghatari and Hasiri (2010) found that employees who work for an organization with high morale develop higher rates of job satisfaction, creativeness and innovation, job honorability (i.e., respect for their own job), commitment to the organization, eagerness to satisfy group objectives instead of individual objectives, and they desire to improve the organization's performance. On the other hand, low staff morale can be costly to organizations. According to the Gallup Organization (2008), organizations could stand to lose \$350 billion per year because of the loss of productivity caused by low morale. Also, several researchers asserted that low levels of morale could cause increased costs, absenteeism, strikes, lack of motivation and interest, decreased efficiency and could lead to staff's

refusal to provide services (Cappelli 1997; Firth et.al. 1997; Norsworthy et.al, 1982; Reed 2009; Straka 1993).

There are many reasons behind low staff morale, but the top reason mentioned the most by researchers is poor leadership. Fretwell (2002) emphasized the importance of the leaders' role, since organizations are significantly influenced by the leaders' vision and decisions. Psychometrics Canada (2010) also reported that poor leadership has negative effects on staff morale. Moreover, the distrust of management, poor interpersonal relations (i.e., relationships between leader and staff), and inflexible working conditions could be other factors that affect staff morale (Dye & Garman, 2006). Finally, according to Workforce Performance Solutions (2006), low morale may be caused by departmental layoffs or closures, labor negotiations and contract disputes, high employee turnover rates, changes in leadership, and unclear expectations. They also stated that the lack of opportunity for personal growth because of unchallenging environments leads to low morale.

Approaches to combat low staff morale

Some researchers suggest that servant leadership might be the answer that will increase staff morale (Greenleaf, 1996; Senge, 1990). According to Spears (2004), a servant leader is someone who places priority on the needs of their staff and the community they serve. Their main focus is to enable people to reach goals and fulfill expectations. Eventually, this style of leadership inspires the leader's staff to be more motivated and proactive in their daily activities. Moreover, leaders who practice servant

leadership tend to be more trusted and are more effective in creating a culture of trust required to increase or maintain high staff morale (Greenleaf, 1996).

Also, Dye and Garman (2006) emphasized that staff morale may be improved by increasing accessibility and authenticity, fostering openness, and role modeling.

Accessibility and fostering openness relate to the approachability and availability in an organization's workforce (Dye & Garman, 2006). The authors also pointed out the importance of authenticity, which refers to genuine and credible interactions between staff. Dye and Garman (2006) also found that authenticity could form faith and trust between staff members and create situations where they might find role models or good examples to follow, which ultimately could lead to higher staff morale as Greenleaf (2006) mentioned above. Psychometrics Canada (2010) also mentioned that the most effective staff morale boosting behaviors of managers are to 1) talk less and listen more; 2) give clear expectations; 3) have more informal interaction with staff; 4) assign tasks to staff based on skills rather than office politics; 5) give more rights to staff; (e.g., give staff more opportunities to make a decision for certain tasks) and 6) to respect people with greater expertise. Lastly, an important way to understand the current employee morale climate is by administering culture or climate surveys regularly. The cycle of the survey may depend on certain variables such as the size of the organization. However, generally, it is recommended that a culture or climate survey be administered every nine to eighteen months. This would allow adequate time for management to implement plans to improve or maintain levels of morale between each survey. A shorter time frame would not provide enough time for survey outcomes to change and may cause staff to grow weary of taking surveys. (*Employee Surveys*, 2012). For example, a study by Lloyd

(2003) demonstrated the importance of consistent monitoring of the morale climate among the organization's staff to confirm the current status of employee morale. He conducted a staff morale survey of the Memphis Fire Department employees and found that disciplinary practices and poor communication were the reasons for the recent drop in morale. Moreover, the results indicated that recognition and appreciation were two main reasons that morale rose (Lloyd, 2003).

Conclusion

In a recent membership survey of park and recreation professionals, the Illinois Park and Recreation (IPRA) association found that staff burnout and low morale were the biggest trends and issues of IPRA members (Office of Recreation and Park Resources, 2012). As a result, this white paper was developed to investigate previous research on the crucial issues of staff burnout and low morale. These issues are especially important in the park and recreation field, since it is a human service industry, and the staff directly interacts with community members and patrons.

Staff burnout and morale are complex issues and intertwined with diverse factors. Dealing with these issues may require a significant amount of time and effort within an agency. However, small actions could make a significant difference in combating these issues, since they are developed through human interactions and relationships.

For expanded conversation on this topic or additional information and resources,
please contact one of the following authors:

Chungsup Lee lee782@illinois.edu

Jarrod Scheunemann scheune1@illinois.edu

Laura Payne lpayne@illinois.edu

Robin Hall rrrhall@illinois.edu

Or visit the Office of Recreation & Park Resources website at:

www.orpr.illinois.edu

References

- Analoui, F. (2000). What motivates senior managers?: The case of Romania, *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 15(4), 324-340.
- Beasley, M., Thompson, T., & Davidson, J. (2003). Resilience in response to life stress: the effects of coping style and cognitive hardiness. *Personality & Individual Differences*, 34(1), 77.
- Bond, M. (1986). *Stress and Self-Awareness: A Guide for Nurses*, London: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Borritz, M (2006). *Burnout in human service work – causes and consequences: Results of 3-years of follow-up of the PUMA study among human service workers in Denmark* (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation). National Institute of Occupational Health, Denmark.
- Barnett, R. C., Brennan, R. T., & Gareis, K. C. (1999). A closer look at the measurement of burnout. *Journal of Applied Biobehavioral Research*, 4(2), 65-78.
- Cappelli, P., Bassi, L., Katz, H., Knoke, D., Osterman, P., & Useem, M. (1997). *Change at Work*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Caton D. J., Grossnickle W. F., Cope J. G., Long T. E. & Mitchell C. C. (1988) Burnout and stress among employees at a state institution for mentally retarded persons. *American Journal on Mental Retardation*, 93, 300–304.
- Chambers, R. (1996). GP's low morale is contributing factor. *British Medical Journal*, 313, 302.
- Cox, K. B. (2001). The effects of unit morale and interpersonal relations on conflict in the nursing unit. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 35(1), 17-25.

- Dye, F. C. & Garman, N. A. (2006). *Exceptional Leadership: 16 Critical Competencies For Healthcare Executives*. Chicago: Health Administration Press.
- Espeland, K. E. (2006). Overcoming burnout: How to revitalize your career. *Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing, 37*(4), 178-184.
- Fard, H. D., Ghatari, A. R., & Hasiri, A. (2010). Employees' morale in public sector: Is organizational trust an important factor? *European Journal of Scientific Research, 46*(3), 378-390.
- Firth, L., Mellor, D. J., Moore, K. A., & Loquet, C. (2004). How can managers reduce employee intention to quit? *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 19*(2), 170-187.
- Fretwell, J. B. (2002). Promoting Organizational Competency: A solution to increasing employee morale and customer satisfaction. Retrieved from <http://www.ceresinnovations.com/tools.htm>
- Gallup Organization (2008). Health care practice. Retrieved from <http://www.galluporganization.com>
- Grandey, A. A. (2003). When "the show must go on": Surface acting and deep acting as determinants of emotional exhaustion and peer-rated service delivery. *Academy of Management Journal, 46*(1), 86-96.
- Greenleaf, R.K. (1996). *On becoming a servant-leader*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass Publishers.
- Hegarty, J. R. (1987). Staff Burnout: a single case study. *Mental Handicap, 15*, 93-95.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1993). Preface. In S. Fineman (Ed.), *Emotion in organizations* (pp. ix-xiii). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

How Often Should You Repeat Your Employee Satisfaction Survey? (n.d.). Retrieved April 27, 2012, from

<http://www.employeesurveys.com/esatprocess/ESAHowoften.htm>

Kramer, B. J. (1993). Expanding the conceptualization of caregiver coping: The importance of relationship-focused coping strategies. *Family Relations*, 42(4), 383-391.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York, NY: Springer.

Leighton S. L & Roye, A. K. (1984). Prevention and self-care for professional burnout. *Family and Community Health*, 6(4), 44-56.

Lloyd, H. B. (2003). *Morale matters*. Memphis Fire Department. Memphis, TN. Retrieved from www.usfa.fema.gov/pdf/efop/efo36355.pdf

Maslach, C. (1993). Burnout: A multidimensional perspective. In W.B. Schaufeli, C. Maslach, & T. Marek (Eds.), *Professional burnout: recent developments in theory and research* (pp.19-32). Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.

Maslach, C. (2003). *Burnout: The cost of caring*. Cambridge, MA: Malor.

Maslach, C., & Jackson, S. (1986). *Maslach burnout inventory manual*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Maslach, C., Jackson, S. E., & Leiter, M. P. (1996). *Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual* (3rd ed.). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W. B., & Leiter, M. P. (2001). Job burnout. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 397-422.

- Mazin, R. (2010). The effects of high morale on employee performance.
Retrieved from <http://www.ehow.com>.
- McKnight, D. H., Ahmad, S. and Schroeder, R. G. (2001). When do feedback, incentive control and autonomy improve morale? The importance of employee-management relationship closeness. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, 13(4), 466-482.
- Millett, T (2010). 6 reasons why staff morale is important. Retrieved from <http://EzineArticles.com>
- Moore, K., & Cooper, C.L. (1996). Stress in mental health professionals: A theoretical overview. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 42(2), 82–89.
- Noroian E.L. & Yasko, J. (1982). Care for the critical care-giver: strategies for the prevention of burnout. *Dimensions of Critical Care Nursing*, 1(2), 97-101.
- Norsworthy, J. R., & Zabala, C. A. (1982). A note on introducing a measure of worker attitude in cost function estimation. *Economics Letters*, 10(1-2), 185-191.
- O'Brien, T. B., & DeLongis, A. (1996). Coping with chronic stress: An interpersonal perspective. In B. H. Gottlieb (Ed.), *Coping with chronic stress*. New York, NY: Plenum.
- Office of Recreation and Park Resources. (2012). *2011 IPRA Membership Survey Report*. Champaign, IL: Hall, R., Payne, L., Scheunemann, J. & Lee, C. Retrieved from <http://www.orpr.uiuc.edu/ResourcesReportsResearch/Reports.aspx>
- Pau, A. K. H., Croucher, R., Sohanpal, R., Muirhead, V., & Seymour, K. (2004). Emotional intelligence and stress coping in dental undergraduates: a qualitative study. *British Dental Journal*, 197(4), 205-209.

Pines, A. M. & Aronson, E. (1998). *Career Burnout: Causes and cures*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Psychometrics Canada (2010). Feuding and failure vs. Performance and innovation.

Retrieved from <http://www.psychometrics.com/docs/leadership.pdf>

Ramarajan, L., Barsade, S.G. & Burack, O. "What makes the job tough? The influence of organizational respect on burnout in the Human Services." *Academy of Management Annual Meeting, August 2006. Atlanta, Georgia.*

Rauktis, M. E. & Koeske, G. F. (1994). Maintaining social worker morale: When supportive supervision is not enough. *Administration in Social Work, 18*(1), 39-60.

Reed, K. (2001). The use of correspondence analysis to develop a scale to measure workplace morale from multi-level data. *Social Indicators Research, 57*(3), 339-51.

Royal College of Nursing. (2005). *Working well initiative. Managing your stress: A guide for nurses*. London: Royal College of Nursing.

Schaufeli, W.B. & Enzmann, D. (1998). *The burnout companion to study and practice: a critical analysis*. London: Taylor & Francis.

Senge, P. (Ed.). (1990). *The fifth discipline*. New York, NY: Currency Doubleday.

Shubin, S. (1978). Burnout: the professional hazard you face in nursing. *Nursing, 78*(7), 22-27.

Straka, J. W. (1993). Is poor worker morale costly to firms? *Industrial and Labor Relations Review, 46*(2), 381-394.

The National Organization for Human Services. (2009). *What is human Services?*

Retrieved from <http://www.nationalhumanservices.org/what-is-human-services>

Ulrich, D. (1997). *Human Resource Champions. The next agenda for adding value and delivering results*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press.

Workforce Performance Solutions. (2006). *The high cost of low morale*. Retrieved from <http://www.wpsmag.com>