

Overcoming HR Burnout:

The Guide to Self Care for Strategic HR Leaders

The last few years have been tough on us all, and have brought about massive change and uncertainty in the workplace. HR professionals in particular have been strongly impacted — [in a recent Paychex report](#), 98% of HR leaders said that 2021 was one of the most challenging years of their career, and that the pandemic transformed their role. With HR professionals taking on more of a caretaker role, their own wellbeing and self-care is more likely to be deprioritized, leading to increased burnout that can prevent them from being able to fully support the wellbeing of the team as a whole. As we move into

defining and embracing the ‘new normal’ of the workplace, HR burnout simply cannot be ignored.

In this guide, we will examine the factors that are driving HR burnout and share tactics that HR leaders can take to engage in more self care in the workplace. Because care is a collective effort, we will also discuss the role that organizational culture and leadership plays in the wellbeing of HR professionals, and how a culture of organizational care can be built.



Why HR Leaders are Burned Out

Dealing with people and their concerns day in and day out has always been a uniquely taxing job, but there are a few reasons why HR burnout is becoming increasingly prevalent right now.

Constant Change and Uncertainty

The last few years have been a rollercoaster, and HR leaders have had the added pressure of leading their teams through it all. Seemingly overnight, HR professionals were asked to become experts on policy changes, health requirements, office closures, office reopens, hybrid work, and more.

And even as we “get back to normal”, the workplace has completely evolved, and it is a new normal that we are returning to. The shift to hybrid work presents a new world of challenges that HR leaders must be prepared to face. While HR departments have introduced technologies and policies to support remote and hybrid work, concerns around things like company culture, engagement, and inclusion will rise to the forefront, and many people expect HR leaders to have all the answers — not remembering that this is all new to them, too.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE HR FUNCTION

Over the past few decades, the HR function has been evolving, and that change has rapidly accelerated over the past few years. Many changes in society are contributing to the increasing complexity of the HR function, including technology advances, social unrest, the COVID-19 pandemic, and more. In addition, employees are now expecting a lot more out of their employers, and the HR function is tasked with rising to the occasion of fulfilling employees' needs. Thus, the HR function today is actually a blend of multiple functions — like marketing for employer branding, finance for payroll and compensation, IT for managing the HR tech ecosystem, and so on. The evolution of the HR function provides a huge opportunity for HR leaders to impact the performance of the business, but if HR leaders are not supported as they take on more strategic leadership, that opportunity could be lost.



The Great Resignation

The Great Resignation has created stress for HR professionals on many different levels. With many employees quitting en masse, employers are struggling to fill openings and are finding themselves in a “talent war”, making finding good, quality hires more competitive than ever. This puts a lot of pressure on the HR team to ensure that the company is offering top notch benefits. HR leaders are being asked to balance the work of preventing turnover with the additional work of recruiting like they’ve never had to before. Furthermore, with so many employees leaving, and spots being left vacant, the average employee is taking on more work, and getting more burned out. HR leaders are now also tasked with dealing with the burnout of the employees that remain. HR departments themselves are often understaffed, so when an understaffed HR team is trying to alleviate the stress and burnout of other understaffed teams, it is only natural that the HR team would quickly burnout as well.

as COVID-19 led to a series of massive layoffs, and continued conversations about work safety, return to office plans, and more.

In addition, while HR professionals can guide strategy and create programs, most of the day-to-day execution and communication falls on an employee’s direct manager. Thus, HR teams are having to rely on others to execute for them — and many managers are underprepared to manage and/or burned out. So even if the HR team has developed robust and quality programs to support people, the direct manager’s level of ability to communicate with their teams plays a big role in how impactful those programs actually are. To make matters worse, some managers treat the HR function as a scapegoat for unpopular policies, decisions, etc., saying things like “HR is making us do it.” This messaging greatly undermines the HR function, but can be hard for HR leaders to control.

Being the Bearer of Bad News

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges HR professionals face is having to be the bearer of bad news. Even if they do not have a say in the decision, they are often expected to deliver difficult news to employees and deal with the emotions and concerns that arise as a result. This challenge has never been as prominent as it has been in the past two years,



COMPASSION FATIGUE

HR today goes way beyond administrative work. It is safe to say that HR leaders today take on a caregiver role within the organization. They are expected to be there at all times to field employees' concerns, and they are expected to quickly come up with solutions to alleviate those concerns. Most HR leaders would say that they love supporting people, but even the most empathetic, compassionate person can get burned out

on caring for the needs of others day in and day out. Many HR leaders are facing compassion fatigue, which is when emotional and physical exhaustion leads to a diminished ability to feel compassion or empathy for others. This [compassion fatigue](#) can make it increasingly difficult for HR leaders to keep up with the demands of employees in need of care, which can have a strong negative impact on overall team morale.

How HR Leaders Can Engage in Self Care

HR leaders are often tasked with taking care of others, but proactively engaging in your own self care is crucial. Here are some steps that HR leaders can take to engage in self care in the workplace, so they can avoid burnout and feel better at work while continuing to drive impact.

Setting Boundaries

Now more than ever, it is important for HR professionals to set boundaries around work. With the shift to remote/hybrid work, the lines of home life and work life are blurred, making it harder for some workers to set strong boundaries. In order to prevent burnout, HR professionals must be proactive about setting boundaries.

One method of setting boundaries is setting working hours, and sticking to them. With flexible work hours on the rise, HR professionals may find themselves working later some days and starting later other days, or taking some time out of the day to run an errand. Having the opportunity to work on a flexible schedule is great, but without boundaries around working hours, it is easy to slip into overworking. HR professionals should denote their "in office" hours on their work calendars, so team members know when they can schedule meetings. In addition, notifications should be snoozed after work hours. That Slack message can wait until tomorrow!



Also, those taking PTO should actually take time off. This means setting up an away message, snoozing notifications, and making a plan for who can be contacted for requests during that time. If someone is on PTO but is still responding to emails, they are not really getting that restorative break that they need — and they are continuing to set the expectation that they are always “on”.

Expecting the Unexpected — and Creating Space For It

Of course, planning ahead is always ideal, but any HR leader can tell you that there are some things that you simply cannot prepare for. (Take a global pandemic, for example.) HR professionals are constantly juggling multiple projects and/or issues, and there is no way of knowing what else could get thrown into the mix. But HR professionals actually can prepare by expecting the unexpected, and creating space to deal with it when it inevitably arises. When setting quarterly goals, for example, a portion of your workload should be allocated to dealing with unexpected crises, problems, etc. This helps prevent goals from being shifted as a result of unexpected roadblocks.

Asking For Help

HR professionals are so used to employees coming to them for help that they probably forget that it is ok for them to ask for help as well. HR professionals that are feeling overwhelmed must remember that they can talk to colleagues and ask for assistance or adjust timelines and expectations. Furthermore, HR professionals should make it a habit to reach out to their HR coworkers and ask if they need help. Sometimes people do not feel comfortable asking for help, but will be relieved when someone else takes the initiative to ask what they need — and they will be more likely to return the favor.

Finally, HR professionals must always remember that they can seek external help. If they feel burned out or stressed to the point that their mental health is suffering, they can speak to a mental health provider who can help them build strategies for handling stress and recommend potential treatment options. Nobody should be ashamed of seeking help for mental health. The more HR professionals are comfortable with it, the more others will be, creating a workplace where discussions about mental health are not stigmatized, but encouraged, which is better for everyone.



Networking and Connecting with Others

When HR professionals are bogged down in work, trying to solve issues and put out fires, they may feel like they are all alone. But chances are, if one person is feeling something, others are feeling it too. HR professionals should carve out time and space to connect with others throughout the day, especially their HR coworkers, who are especially likely to understand what they are struggling with and can offer an empathetic ear.

HR professionals that don't feel comfortable talking to coworkers about their stress and burnout can reach out to friends or old colleagues in the industry. If they are struggling to think of someone to reach out to, they can look for online communities, of which there are many.

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Building connections with peers is a powerful way to combat burnout by reminding you that you aren't alone, sparking ideas to help unblock you, and having someone to lean on when you don't have much gas in the tank.

ADAM WEBER, PHD

SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF COMMUNITY
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Organizational Care: How Organizations Can Support the Wellbeing of HR Leaders

As an HR leader, engaging in self care is extremely important, as neglecting your own self care can lead to burnout and a myriad of other issues that affect both you and your organization negatively. But engaging in self care as an individual is only one piece of the puzzle. In order to be fully supported, HR leaders need the organization to engage in what we'll call organizational care.

Organizational care involves systems of support within the organization that create a healthy and happy work environment for all, and empower individuals to prioritize their wellbeing alongside their work. Seeing organizational care as a necessity enforces the idea that the organization plays a large role in the wellbeing of its employees, so the onus of care should not fall solely on the individuals, but on the organization and the leaders, policies, and procedures in place as well.

Here are some factors that contribute to a culture of organizational care.

C-Suite Must Set the Example

A crucial component of organizational care is having leaders that set the example by modeling self care, setting norms, and encouraging healthy habits and practices. If the CEO is always sending emails after work hours, never takes time off, and is always stressed, those habits and that stress will trickle down to the rest of the team.

HR leaders know better than anyone how important it is to model self care, but if the other leaders in the organization are contradicting that message, it will be hard for a true organizational culture of care to take root.

Psychological Safety and Opportunities for Feedback

Another key component of organizational care is creating an environment where all employees feel like they can speak up about burnout and how they are struggling. Leaders need to cultivate a sense of psychological safety, so that employees feel comfortable addressing concerns without fear of negative repercussions.

While many organizations have made great strides in increasing this sense of psychological



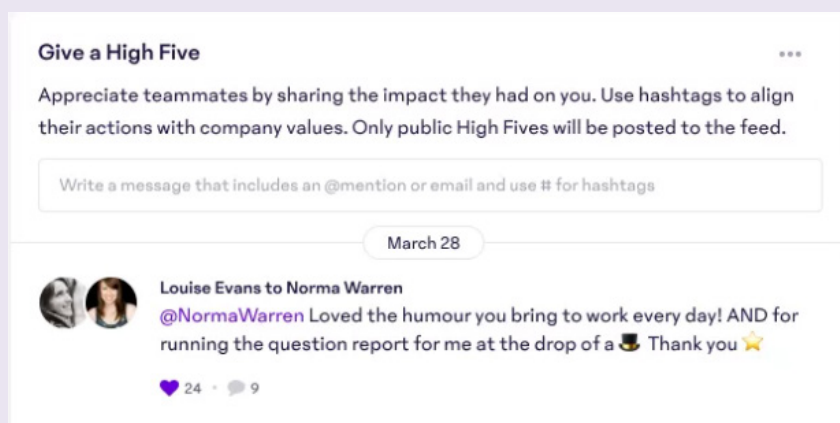
safety and openness to feedback, it does not always spill over to HR leaders. HR leaders, being the people that tend to field these concerns, often do not feel that they have anywhere to turn when they themselves have issues. A truly psychologically safe environment is one that creates space for all people, even the ones that are typically in the caretaker role, to express themselves and be heard.

Because it can be so easy to forget that HR leaders themselves have issues and concerns, organizational leadership should make an effort to carve out intentional space for concerns to be discussed. Regular focus groups or surveys of HR team members can provide insight into what the HR team is struggling with to the rest of the executive team.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND APPRECIATION

HR teams are working tirelessly to ensure everything runs smoothly and people are happy, which is especially difficult during these times of change and uncertainty. With no recognition, it can be easy to feel like all their hard work goes unnoticed and/or unappreciated, and lack of gratitude and recognition can greatly contribute to burnout. [Research from Glassdoor](#) found that 70% of employees would feel better about themselves if their boss were more grateful, and 81% would work harder.

Executive leadership should be going above and beyond to acknowledge HR accomplishments during this time. It could be through an “employee of the month” title, a shoutout in a company Slack channel, or a handwritten note — no matter the method of delivery, any form of gratitude can go a long way and mean a lot to HR professionals.



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Networking and Connecting with Others

There is one thing that can have a large impact on an employee's level of satisfaction and stress that many people do not think about — role clarity. With lack of clarity about their role and what responsibilities fall within it, it can be easy for an employee to become overworked and burned out. HR professionals in particular are struggling with lack of role clarity as the HR function becomes increasingly complex. Many organizational challenges that cannot be clearly directed to any particular leader or team often get pushed under the HR umbrella, which can cause HR professionals to continue filling up their workload when their plate is already full.

To prevent this, there needs to be a strong organizational standard set around having clearly defined roles and responsibilities for every member of the team. Job descriptions should be thoughtfully crafted and revisited routinely to ensure that the description aligns with the work that is actually being done.

[Role clarity](#) goes deeper than just knowing what responsibilities fall under a particular job title. Focusing on role clarity also means giving employees an opportunity to communicate what drives them. HR professionals should be given the opportunity to continuously shape their roles by finding ways to maximize energizing work that is intrinsically motivating, enjoyable, and aligned to their deepest strengths, insights, and values.

Role clarity

Only 50% of people know what's expected of them at work, yet clear expectations are the most basic and fundamental employee need. Clarify the current role first in order to identify the type of work that's most energizing. **This will help you find and define what you want in a career.**



Clarify your role

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Define energizing levels

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Maximize energizing work

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15Five's Role Clarity feature gives employees the clarity they need to succeed in their current roles and an opportunity to communicate what drives them.



QUICK TIPS FOR MAXIMIZING ENERGIZING WORK

Maximizing Energizing Work

- ✓ Help team members do more of what they love
- ✓ Discuss responsibilities that energize them most
- ✓ Brainstorm ideas on how they might do more of what energizes them
- ✓ Create an action plan on how they can be doing work that energizes them 60-70% of the time. (For example, an HR leader who loves presenting could be given more opportunities to lead workshops and panels.)



Minimize De-energizing Work

Roles will most likely include some amount of de-energizing work, even in ideal cases. Managers can help team members minimize the amount of de-energizing work in a couple of ways:

- ✓ **Automate the work:** For example, an HR leader can create a new method of filing or implement a new software system to make their job less repetitive.
- ✓ **Offload the work:** For example, an HR generalist who is de-energized by legal work could offload their work to another team member who is more energized by it
- ✓ **Re-energize the work by helping employees leverage their top strengths:** Team members can take strengths to identify their top strengths and identify ways to leverage those strengths more in the role. For example, an HR leader whose top strength is love of learning can help design people's programs out of the latest science.



Investment in Tools

Today, HR tech is a huge industry — the HR software market is [expected to surpass](#) \$10 billion in 2022.

Thus, there is no shortage of tools that can help HR professionals do their jobs better. Organizations must assess what tools the HR team needs to perform effectively, and then actually invest in those tools to facilitate the team's best work.

As mentioned above, utilizing tools and software can be a great way for HR professionals to offboard or automate de-energizing administrative work, so that they can focus more on work that energizes them, such as developing robust leadership development programs, holding focus groups with employees, planning company retreats, and more.

Clearly Defined Objectives and Goals

When HR leaders have so many different things that they are working on, it can be difficult for them to look back and have a clear picture of all that they have accomplished. But feeling a sense of accomplishment is crucial to an employee's morale.

Thus, in order to support and sustain high morale for HR leaders, organizations need to establish clearly defined objectives and goals at the company level, the team level, and the individual level. When HR leaders know the goals that they are tracking towards, it makes it a lot easier to prioritize, and gives them space to tier incoming requests

based on how aligned they are with the goals and objectives to which they are being held accountable.

When HR professionals are able to look back at the end of the quarter and see how their individual goals have driven and supported organizational goals, they see the stake that they have in the overall success of the company and feel a sense of ownership over it.

Training and Coaching Opportunities

In our [2021 Workplace Report](#), we surveyed more than 1,000 employed U.S. adults and found that career growth, learning, and [people development](#) are among the most important factors for remaining at a company. Unfortunately, we also found that most employers (55.5%) don't offer a clear path for advancement.

Furthermore, HR leaders who are spending their time advocating for and facilitating the professional development of all employees may not be receiving the same access to those growth and development opportunities.

This is more important than ever because, as we noted, the HR function is becoming increasingly complex and the skills that HR professionals need to be successful are ever-evolving. Failing



to provide development opportunities to HR teams will leave them floundering and impact their morale and the organization as a whole.

Thus, other company leadership must make a point to advocate for the continued professional development of those on the HR team. This could be done through providing ongoing management training, supplying a professional development stipend for HR team members to attend external training and conferences, and even holding focus groups for team members to crowdsource ideas for the type of development opportunities they would like to receive.

Growth and development opportunities for HR professionals should not focus solely on tactical skills that will help them do their jobs more effectively, but also soft skills that will help them

manage their thoughts, feelings, and stress in order to prevent burnout and feel happier at work.

Conclusion

A strong company culture with happy, healthy employees starts with HR leaders who are able to engage in their own self-care, and are supported by the organization in doing so. True self-care is cyclical. When HR professionals are empowered to invest in their own self-care, they are less likely to become burned out, and better equipped to support the wellbeing of all employees. This leads to increased employee morale and satisfaction overall, which gives HR professionals a renewed sense of purpose, efficacy, and achievement. And when companies cultivate a culture of organizational care, these positive results are amplified.



About 15Five

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