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THE ADVISOR UNDER STRESS— FIRED UP OR BURNED OUT?

Do you feel tired and worn out? Has your enthusiasm for your work diminished? Do you feel professionally stuck, unable to fulfill your professional expectations? Have you developed a cynical attitude toward your workplace and profession? Do you feel that you are spending more time thinking about vacations and retirement and less about helping students? If you have experienced (or are currently experiencing) these or similar symptoms, you may be suffering from "advisor burnout." The literature is replete with accounts of teacher burnout, manager burnout, military wife burnout, preacher burnout, and so on. With excessive caseloads, lack of status, and poor pay, it is likely that more and more advisors will experience burnout, also. This paper examines possible causes and symptoms of advisor burnout and makes suggestions for its prevention.

INTRODUCTION

In 1900, Robert White coined the word "effectance" to describe the force that exists within the animal organism that motivates the organism to "effect" itself upon its environment or, in the case of the human being, upon its society. His studies of rats illustrate this phenomenon. The rats, when given a choice of route to their food source, would choose a longer and more complex route seemingly to avoid boredom and to maintain some level of stimulation.

Other studies have shown that when a rat is confronted with a motorized toy ferris wheel, the rat will try to start it up if it stops and stop it when it starts. In essence, the rat is attempting to exercise some control over its environment (Hebb, 1972; Kavanah, 1967).

Harry Harlow (1953), in his classic studies with monkeys, showed that monkeys were also concerned with mastery of *their* environment. One of his studies involved solving simple mechanical puzzles. He observed the monkeys working for hours at manipulating hinges and hasps with no apparent reward other than finding the solution to a problem.

This phenomenon is even more apparent in man. The *natural tendency* of man is to effect himself on the environment—to control his environment rather than to be controlled by it. Anxiety and frustration result when this drive for effectance is thwarted. This anxiety can be *positive,* however, and can spark more intense effort and creativity in the solution of the problem or in the elimination of a barrier. On the other hand, the *negative* reactions to frustration can be devastating.

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The literature contains many examples of animal and human reactions to frustration. Among these reactions are aggression, regression, *fixation*, resignation, negativism, repression, and withdrawal (Tiffin and McCormick, 1965).

Aggression may be characterized as an attack directed at another person or object. These attacks can be physical and overt or they can be more subtle, such as the use of gossip and rumor to demean a supervisor or colleague.

Regression, another negative reaction to frustration, is the tendency to revert to earlier forms of behavior such as temper tantrums or pouting.

Fixation is manifested by persistence in a behavior even though it is nonconstructive.

Many individuals when faced with frustration react with *resignation*. They simply give up. This unresolved frustration could result in a loss of zeal for a job and a general sense of apathy.

Individuals can also become very negative when confronted with frustration. If, for example, an individual's suggestions for a solution to a problem are not accepted by the supervisor, he or she may become cynical of anyone else's suggestions.

Repression is still another mechanism people employ in order to deal with frustration. One simply ignores or "blocks out" the problem, thus alleviating the frustration. The implication is that if the problem is ignored, it will simply go away. If a person is frustrated in his or her personal dealings with others, he or she may repress the personal aspects of the situation. That person will then seek to depersonalize all social interactions.

Finally, withdrawal is another reaction to frustration. The person who cannot cope with the stress, the workload, the clients, or other aspects of a job might just remove himself or herself from the frustrating situation and move on to something else.

Human beings can show great dexterity and creativity in manifesting reactions to frustration. Those reactions can be subtle or bold, but most can be classified reasonably well into one of the above categories.

SPECIFICS OF BURNOUT

Burnout Defined

Burnout, an increasingly visible term in the literature and in the vernacular, has characteristics closely resembling a negative reaction to frustration. The similarities become even more apparent in the discussion of burnout. Although most people have some general understanding of burnout, it is difficult to define specifically. When asked what burnout meant to him, Richard Bolles, author of What Color is *Your* Parachute?, replied, "Burnout is kind of like pornography: I'm not sure I can define it, but I know what it is when I see it (Forney, Wallace-Schutzman, and Wiggers, 1982).

> One of the biggest difficulties with the concept of burnout is that it has become faddish and indiscriminate, an item of psychobabble, the psychic equivalent . . . of jogging. Burnout has no psychiatric status. Many psychoanalysts regard the malady as simply that old familiar ache, depression. . . . It is like the nervous breakdown of our parents' day.

Burnout has become so faddish that the literature is filled with articles on the burnout of teachers, military wives (O'Beirne, 1983), Quaker ministers (Bills, 1983), and almost everyone (Morrow, 1981). It has likewise become so pervasive, however we define it or identify it, that Herbert J. Freudenberger, a fellow of the American Psychological Association, estimates that 20% of the population suffers from it (Watkins, 1982).

It is hard to separate the definition of burnout from the symptoms. In fact, many times symptoms are used to define burnout. In an attempt to define burnout more fully, it may be viewed both attitudinally and behaviorally.

Attitudes Associated with Burnout

1. Significant loss of motivation, enthusiasm, and energy (Forney et al., 1982)
2. Sense of failure or exhaustion from demands on one's resources that cannot be met (Watkins, 1982)
3. Emotional exhaustion from feelings of being "professionally stuck" (Watkins, 1982)
4. Feelings of alienation, frustration, attenuated self worth and apathy (Pines and Maslach, 1978)
5. Loss of concern for and detachment from fellow workers (Bundy, 1981)
6. A cynical and dehumanized perception of others (Bundy, 1981)

Behaviors Associated with Burnout

1. Marked departure from the individual's behavioral norm (Forney et al., 1982)
2. Excessive complaining and cynicism (Savicki and Cooley, 1982)
3. Absenteeism (Savicki and Cooley, 1982)
4. Abnormal desire for vacations (Bardo, 1979)
5. Lack of commitment to job and institution (Bardo, 1979)
6. Low self esteem (Bardo, 1979)
7. Physical illness—muscle tension, physical disorders such as ulcers and insomnia (Forney et al., 1982)
8. Alcoholism and/or drug abuse (Savicki and Cooley, 1982)
9. Clinical depression (Forney et al., 1982)
10. Quitting the job or profession (Savicki and Cooley, 1982)

Although the above attitudes and behaviors—symptoms, if you will—are not meant to be comprehensive and exhaustive, burnout is usually associated with one or more of these attitudes and behaviors.

Burnout seems to be a generalized reaction to some form of frustration and may manifest itself in many different ways, and in many levels of severity. Joseph Katz, director of Research for Human Development and Educational Policy at S.U.N.Y., Stony Brook, says "it includes everything from [unfulfilled]aspirations through dissatisfaction to straight clinical depression."

Clearly the symptoms are somewhat nebulous and can vary in severity so much that a clear definition of burnout cannot be accurately written. It manifests itself differently for different people. This leads to the next obvious question: What causes burnout, or, more specifically, what causes *advisors* to "bum out?"

Causes of Burnout

Ayala Pines, a research associate at the University of California at Berkley says the main causes of burnout are "lack of significance in your work and lack of control over your environment . . . the feeling that what you do doesn't matter is a big cause of burnout." When you're pushing toward tenure or a deanship or a directorship, you feel you know why you're doing that. But when you get there, there is a feeling of "Is this it?" "Is this what I sacrificed for?" and if

you don't get there, there is the feeling of failure and despair (Watkins, 1982). This perception of lack of control may come from seeming to have too much to do and not enough time in which to do it (Savicki and Cooley, 1982). Also, when people feel they are locked into a limited income range and have few opportunities to participate in policymaking, they begin to feel powerless and frustrated (Bundy, 1981).

The degree of intensity on the job is also related to burnout. Job intensity is affected by factors such as length of contact with a client, ratio of students to staff, size of caseload, and so forth. As intensity increases, the professional has less time with fellow workers, less free time, and more stress (Savicki and Cooley, 1982).

Lack of social support and feedback from administrators, supervisors, and fellow workers may also contribute to burnout. Many organizations offer little recognition for the positive effects their workers create, and tend, instead, to focus on failures or problems. Failures are often clearly observable, but there may be no clear ways of judging success (Savicki and Cooley, 1982).

An overly idealistic view of the profession or the position might also result in burnout. When one gets overly involved and feels he has personal control and full responsibility for outcomes, he is ripe for feelings of burnout. When reality finally hits home, then attitudes may switch to depersonalization (Savicki and Cooley, 1982). Industry has found through their experiences of hiring college graduates that they must include, as a part of their training program, a session dealing with the reduction of expectations. Novices seem to be very idealistic and are often devastated when they find that the position is much less glamorous and more routine than they expected.

Many times a professional is either undertrained for his job or been taught a false concept of how it is in the real world. Either could lead to disillusionment (Bundy, 1981).

Repetitive tasks, boredom, lack of advancement opportunities, money, lack of challenges, and insufficient time for personal and professional development are several other potential causes of burnout (Forney et al., 1982). Burnout might also develop when a person is doing things he really does not want to do—like teaching remedial English when he was trained in Shakespeare (Watkins, 1982).

Burnout is a generalized malady that results from not being able to effect oneself on the environment. Its symptoms can range from the tinge of disappointment felt when one's aspirations have not entirely been realized to clinical depression and physical illness. It must be remembered that there is no direct cause-and-effect relationship in burnout. There may be many contributing factors that cumulatively result in burnout.

Advisor Burnout

Academic advising, as many of us know it and live it, has within it the seeds for discontent. Even though advisors work for institutions of higher education, there is still some contact with the "real" world. This contact with both the "academic" and the "real" worlds points up inequities in both areas.

One does not have to look too exhaustively for examples of inequities within the real world. The man next door who works on the assembly line at Chevrolet, the manager of the local "Burger Doodle," and the postal letter carrier are only a few of the folks in the neighborhood who typically earn more than the average academic advisor with all his education and ex-

perience. Even in the work environment, advisors work with students who will graduate in accounting, engineering, or computer science and earn more on their first job than their advisor earns now.

Academic colleagues on the teaching faculty carry more esteem than that typically accorded a professional academic advisor. James S. Coleman (1973) puts it quite well:

> No person with comparable skills in society—indeed, perhaps no other person at any level of skill—receives a regular salary without a fixed time commitment, thus remaining free to use that time for his own purposes or to sell it to others. It is a defect of which faculty members are beneficiaries, for they have both a regular salary and their time. Independent professionals, like artists, doctors, and lawyers, retain control over their time, but at the cost of a regular salary. Salaried persons other than university (teaching) faculty members have a regular salary, but at the cost of control over their time.

When this is coupled with tenure, availability of sabbaticals, the possibility of promotion, and occasionally the opportunity to teach in an off-campus or overseas program, the professional advisor, who works at least forty hours per week with few external rewards, can work himself up to a burnout in pretty short order. Advisors have questions of self esteem and seem to frequently have little evidence of the esteem of others—no status, no power, and poor pay. They are also many times carrying excessive caseloads and have high job intensity.

Advisors can keep telling themselves that they are doing something that is worthwhile and helpful even though not financially rewarding. This is the rationalization that keeps public school teachers, social workers, correction officers, counselors in community counseling centers, and academic advisors from giving it up altogether.

In 1971 a Wall *Street Journal* survey found that the most physically draining and mentally numbing jobs were working at a foundry furnace, selling subway tokens, lifting lids on a steel mill oven, and removing hair and fat from hog carcasses (Morrow, 1981). Compared to these occupations, academic advising looks pretty good. The question is, however, what can be done to make it better? How can advisors be motivated and encouraged so they do not suffer the effects of advisor burnout?

Prevention of Burnout

The key to prevention of burnout lies in motivation. Abraham Maslow, a pioneer in the humanistic approach to understanding human behavior, developed a theory of motivation based upon human needs (1954). He established a hierarchy of needs beginning at the basic physiological level and proceeding up the scale to self actualization. Maslow's theory tells us that the basic physiological needs must be satisfied before the next higher needs for safety and security, belongingness, and so forth, become important as motivators. These basic needs, classified as maintenance needs, are the most basic needs for persons to function adequately in our society. Actualization is a goal seldom reached but for which persons are motivated to strive. It involves components of personal achievement, broader understanding, and self fulfillment.

Frederick Herzberg (1959), a pioneer in industrial psychology, has done considerable research and writing on job satisfaction and motivation. Job satisfaction, according to Herzberg, is a function of what he calls hygiene factors. Hygiene factors are those conditions of employment that must be met to temporarily prevent dissatisfaction but never satisfy and never motivate. Factors such as salary, fringe benefits, working environment, and good human-

relations, for example, can temporarily prevent dissatisfaction but can neither satisfy nor motivate. It is in their absence that these hygiene factors cause great dissatisfaction. Their presence, then, helps avoid dissatisfaction but does not satisfy or motivate.

The placement of salary among the hygiene factors is confusing to most people. The explanation can be seen when **Maslow** and Herzberg are compared as in Table 1 (Kaiser, 1981). Once the physiological needs are met, salary no longer motivates. Most academic advisors, for example, make enough money to satisfy their basic physiological needs, but some have concerns in the next level with safety and security. With the tentative, often part-time and temporary, nature of the advisors' employment, job security seems negligible.

Although some motivation may be exhibited at the level of belongingness/social/love, motivation factors really do not come into full play at the fourth or fifth levels (ego and self actualization). The following are motivators at the fourth and fifth levels:

1. A chance for advancement
2. A sense of achievement
3. Recognition for a job well done
4. Responsibility
5. An enriched, meaningful, and interesting job

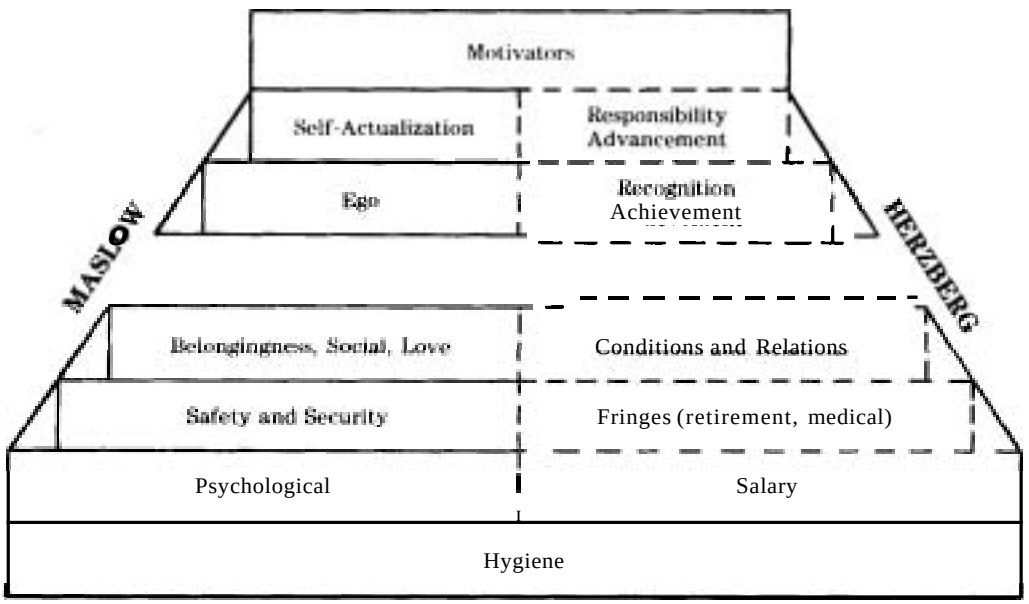

Table 1

Personal and Job-Related
Factors of Motivation
(Kaiser, 1981)

No employer can prevent burnout by increasing hygiene factors of salary and fringe benefits. The most that can be expected from hygiene factors is that advisors might decide not to quit their jobs and, instead, stay on and do the minimum amount of work to keep from being fired. Many advisors, with even the hygiene factors slipping away, are finding little reason to stay. At the same time, those advisors with good security, reasonable salary, good working conditions, and other hygiene factors are not being challenged professionally, are not feeling any sense of recognition or achievement, and have no routes to advancement. Thus, they are finding themselves falling victim to burnout.

CONCLUSION

College deans, directors of advising, and other supervisory f i r e s need a better understanding of what motivates those in their charge. Quite often they wring their hands and say, "I can't help it, the provost (dean, president, etc.) will not give me more money." With a reasoned approach using job enrichment and responsibility, it is possible to prevent burnout ***without*** expending larger and larger sums of money. Perhaps more high-level administrative support, a commitment on the part of the college or university to quality academic advising, and genuine recognition of outstanding advisors will help prevent burnout more effectively than a small raise and a pat on the head.

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