

# **Address Burnout by Keeping Employees S.A.N.E.**



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PEER & PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

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The lasting effects of COVID-19 are challenging the well-being of employees, notably due to the emotional and/or physical exhaustion from work that causes burnout. IT leaders can use Gartner's S.A.N.E. framework to identify and address the underlying triggers linked to employee burnout.

Amid the unprecedented business disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, one potentially overlooked consequence is the rise of employee burnout – the emotional and/or physical exhaustion that results in a lack of motivation and a reduced sense of accomplishment. Employee burnout can lead to high levels of absenteeism, turnover and low productivity (see Figure 1). Additionally, burnout contributes to creating disengaged employees, who cost their employers up to 34% of budgeted annual salary. <sup>1</sup>

## Figure 1: Impact of Burnout on Employees



### Impact of Burnout on Employees



63% more likely to take sick leave



2.6 times as likely to seek a different job



13% lower confidence on performance

n = 7,500

Source: "Employee Burnout, Part 1: The 5 Main Causes," Gallup

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A loss of control, lack of communication and psychological safety from managers, unreasonable time pressures, insufficient social support, isolation, and unclear job expectations are common causes of employee burnout <sup>2</sup> – all of which have been exacerbated by the remote working conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many IT leaders tell Gartner that, while they recognize the substantial decline of employee performance, they can struggle to apply the emotional intelligence skills necessary to create meaningful employee behavioral change (see [Demystifying Emotional Intelligence for PPM Staff](#)).

While burnout is a complex psychological state with no quick fixes, the first step is acknowledging its importance to the organization's overall sustainability and addressing the situation directly. By following the insights and recommendations outlined in Gartner's S.A.N.E framework, IT leaders can take the necessary steps to combat employee burnout: **Spot, Assess, Neutralize and Educate**.

## Action No. 1: SPOT the Signs of Burnout

One challenging aspect of employee burnout is that each case is unique. Some employees may experience a "slow burn," with symptoms building over a period of time, and others may seem to seemingly "flame out" abruptly once they reach the tipping point. With the extended timeline for remote working and, subsequently, fewer in-person collaboration opportunities, the challenge for leaders – or even managers – to spot these behaviors becomes even trickier.

This requires leaders to focus on learning about their employees and watching for several subtle changes in an employee's work practices or attitude. Some common signs of employee burnout include a/an:

- Inability to make simple decisions
- Surge in preventable errors
- Increase in cynicism, irritability or pessimism
- Shift from being proactive to reactive
- Obsession with small work problems
- Lack of team participation and withdrawal from interactions
- Decline in overall self-confidence
- Increase in health and wellness issues

## Action No. 2: ASSESS the Burnout

After the first signs of burnout are discovered, the appropriate next step would be engaging employees in a timely manner to confirm any suspicions regarding burnout. IT leaders should incorporate an emotional and empathetic dialogue in one-on-one meetings to enable a more natural discussion regarding the topic of burnout (see [3 Strategies to Address the Emotional Challenges of a Pandemic](#)).

Consider starting out with a couple of questions that naturally lead to the main conversation topic. These questions should provide clues to potential triggers and causes of employee burnout while still avoiding a performance-improvement tone that may alarm employees. Some examples of these questions include:

- How are you feeling about your work?
- Has anything changed on your end?
- Has anything been causing you frustration or creating pressure?
- Is there anything I can do to alleviate your current workload?

This new topic may stretch the boundaries of preconceived notions of workplace discussions, so be prepared to condition yourself and other employees when introducing this topic. One idea for this could be to introduce the common burnout signs identified in step No. 1 above at a team or all-hands meeting. Additionally, embrace the reality that every employee is different and each situation must be addressed with a fresh perspective. Not only will these one-on-one dialogues reduce the possibility of the employee feeling even more stressed by the sudden concern, but it can also provide critical background information that may support the comprehension of the employee's challenges.

### Action No. 3: NEUTRALIZE the Sources of Burnout

Once the burnout has been identified and assessed, IT leaders need to counteract it from a variety of angles. Enable employees to take back control, as small actions can make a big difference (see [Use Crisis Culture Hacking to Keep Employees Sane Over the Long Haul](#)). Some of these actions include:

- Establish clear boundaries for work and personal time
- Reassess existing deadlines to determine what responsibilities that may seem urgent mentally can be deprioritized in reality
- Prioritize sleep and healthy habits — burnout is a condition that requires physical healing
- Take your lunch break and/or distribute breaks throughout the day
- Start to open up to colleagues or friends outside of work <sup>3</sup>

Make a specific plan of action with employees, focusing on the necessary changes that they can make in their daily work, either personally or professionally. Establish check-ins during future one-on-one discussions and continue to evolve the plan as they progress.

While the tactics to neutralize burnout for any employee are unique, the causes can reflect a [broader organizational challenge](#). Evaluate team dynamics and structure to compile a list of potential triggers, classified by whether those sources can be controlled or not. For example, one

executive, recognizing that excess hours worked could be controlled, monitored the number of days an employee worked around the clock and set up a rotation schedule to allow for a day of rest. This demonstrates not only support and appreciation for the employees, but also that burnout is a legitimate organizational concern that requires top-down attention (see [From Push to Passion: Using Inspiration as a Management Approach](#)).

## Action No. 4: EDUCATE to Avoid Future Burnout

Leaders and employees need to be well-informed about the realities of burnout and steps they can take to spot, assess and neutralize the causes. Addressing immediate burnout symptoms can help employees in the short term, but organizations must also consider how to address burnout in the long term. It is imperative to educate everyone about how to recognize one's own symptoms and potentially spot them from afar in others.

IT leaders can educate employees about what triggers are contributing to their burnout and what actions can be taken to regain control. Make this a topic of discussion at team meetings. If your organization offers employee assistance through support groups or programs, inform employees about how to leverage them. Sharing success stories and best practices of how others have combated burnout will enable other employees to relate these lessons learned to their own personal experiences. Educating employees and adding this topic to team meetings helps everyone feel they are not alone, that this is a real condition and can break through any negative stigma.

Employees themselves can also take action by creating open dialogues with colleagues to discuss work-related and personal stressors. Weekly meetings and broader happy hours can help initially, but part of addressing burnout is disrupting a negative flow when they feel symptoms arising, so employees need to feel more empowered to schedule short, impromptu breaks or chats when needed (see [Squash Meeting Fatigue With Three Simple Actions](#)). Many of their colleagues likely feel the impact of burnout to varying degrees, and open dialogue supports the scalability of best practices for addressing burnout.

## Conclusion

Understanding the stages of S.A.N.E. for addressing burnout can be an effective mechanism for creating meaningful change in emotional stability – and, subsequently, productivity – across the organization. By identifying the signs, understanding root causes, pursuing direct solutions and preparing for the future, IT leaders can reduce the impact of burnout for a wide variety of employees.

*This is a guest article written with contributions from Elise Olding, a Gartner research vice president, covering the complex challenges of organizational change and business transformation from a people perspective.*

## Recommended by the Authors

[Leading in a Disruptive Crisis: A Framework for PMO Leaders](#) — This framework will help PPM leaders think through short-term actions needed to adjust and adapt to new working realities, and

also mid- and long-term actions needed to prepare for resilience and return to growth.

[Case Study: Scaled Change Management Support \(Adobe\)](#) – This case study helps PPM leaders adopt Adobe’s approach to provide accessible change support for employees across the organization.

[Mitigate COVID-19’s Impact in PPM With These Action Items](#) – This guide outlines the five steps PPM leaders can take to mitigate COVID-19’s impact, including implementing best practices for remote work, preparing for increasing cost pressures and building effective two-way communication channels.

[Squash Meeting Fatigue With Three Simple Actions](#) – This article explains how IT leaders, including program and portfolio management leaders can leverage three strategies to overcome the pervasive challenge of meeting fatigue.

[Want to Better Manage Change? Think Like a Therapist](#) – This research teaches three powerful techniques relevant for both project managers and PPM leaders who act as change agents at their organizations.

## Endnotes

- [1 Burnout Is Now An Officially Diagnosable Condition: Here's What You Need To Know About It](#)
- [2 Employee Burnout, Part 1: The 5 Main Causes](#)
- [3 To Recover from Burnout, Regain Your Sense of Control](#)

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