NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

PREVENTING BURNOUT: THE DEMAND-CONTROL-SUPPORT MODEL

Nano Tools for Leaders® are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes—with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

THE GOAL

Reduce emotional exhaustion using three powerful approaches.

NANO TOOL

Even before the pandemic, burnout was labeled as an epidemic. It's the persistent work-related stress that's exhausting and impairing. In the U.S., over half of employees feel burned out at least some of the time—and it can lead to what has recently been termed "quiet quitting": reduced engagement that manifests in apathy and disconnection. Evidence shows that burnout can result in mistakes on the job, fuels thoughts of quitting, and can be contagious in organizations. Burnout is also linked to depression, memory loss, sleep problems, weakened immune systems, and cardiovascular disease—estimates suggest that it costs over $100 billion in annual health care spending in the U.S. alone.

Burnout is not a problem in your head; it's a problem in your circumstances. Stress may be inevitable, but burnout can be prevented and reduced—even in high-pressure jobs. It requires structural and cultural change, and my favorite model is demand-control-support.

- **Demand**: Make structural changes that lighten the load on the person doing the job or redistribute tasks.

- **Control**: When you can't eliminate demands, you can at least give people the autonomy and skills they need to handle them.

- **Support**: Create cultures that make it easy to request and receive help.

ACTION STEPS

In an episode of my *WorkLife* podcast, "Burnout is everyone's problem," I explored how leaders and employees have applied demand-control-support to fight burnout. Apple | Spotify

1. **Demand**: Identify the most depleting elements of a role and look for ways to reduce them. Consider if some tasks can be automated, and if overtime work and expectations around availability and email are causing burnout, address them at the organizational or team level. The use of project management software and task boards is one way to reduce email output, and management can encourage "office hours" so employees can discuss matters that might otherwise require a lot of back-and-forth messaging.

2. **Control**: This might involve inviting people to participate in setting their own goals, in choosing the best methods to achieve them, or in determining what kind of training would better equip them to deal with difficult tasks. In some organizations, a measure of control can be provided by allowing for flexible hours and/or hybrid work.

3. **Support**: Providing the type and amount of support needed—and then encouraging employees to take advantage of it—requires cultural change. When leaders open up about their challenges and ask for assistance, it normalizes struggle and shows that seeking support is a source of strength, not a sign of weakness. In addition, creating designated roles for support—such as nurse preceptors in hospitals whose responsibility is to help other nurses—can make people more comfortable reaching out.

HOW LEADERS USE IT

At the Cleveland Clinic, task forces were created to help identify sources of stressful work demands and ways to reduce them. As a result, the ways they managed electronic health records were changed to allow doctors and other care providers to spend more time with patients and less time inputting information.

As a high school teacher in Philadelphia, Conrey Callahan was burning out; her school was broke and about half of her students dropped out before graduation. While working about 100 hours a week, she started a local chapter of a mentoring program for high-achieving low-income students—and then volunteered as a mentor. It sounds counterintuitive, but working with highly motivated students restored her sense of control, and the renewed sense of efficacy inspired her to stay on the job for several more years.

Workers on [offshore oil rigs](#) have decreased errors and promoted the safety and well-being of their coworkers by embracing a new culture of support. Instead of continuing to reward displays of masculine strength, daring, and technical prowess, they are now encouraged to ask for and offer help; admit mistakes and discover what caused them (be it anxiety, stress, or lack of experience); and publicly acknowledge and appreciate one another.

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KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION: RELATED EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

People Analytics: HR Transformation through Data, *High-Potential Leaders: Accelerating Your Impact*, *Executive Development Program*

ABOUT NANO TOOLS

Nano Tools for Leaders® was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, director of Custom Programs at Wharton Executive Education. *Nano Tools for Leaders®* is a collaboration between joint sponsors Wharton Executive Education and Wharton's Center for Leadership and Change Management. This collaboration is led by Professors Michael Useem and John Paul MacDuffie.