Chapter 59

"Be Excellent and Do More with Less":
A Paradox behind Job Burnout Threatening Organizational Sustainability

Solveig Beyza Narli Evenstad
University of Nice Sophia Antipolis, France

ABSTRACT

It is common to think of sustainability in the context of environmental issues. However as companies are downsizing, the human dimension of sustainability, i.e. the organizational sustainability is at stake. The sole focus on cost competitiveness pushes already stressed-out employees to be excellent and do more with less at the same time. When employees are caught between such paradoxal injunctions and organizational defense routines hinder dialog, some employees develop dysfunctional coping strategies and end up being burned out. Burnout is associated with depression, lack of motivation, absenteeism, and intention to leave. It has both human and economic consequences threatening the sustainability of an organization. The study of the experience of burnout among three Information and Communication Technology (ICT) workers in Norway conducted as an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is presented as the case and the pathological communication patterns in the organizational culture behind burnout are identified.

INTRODUCTION

There is broad consensus that the working climate has become more intense and demanding. Increased globalization, competition, and increased uncertainty of employment are identified as some of the causes for HR exploitation (Brödner & Knuth, 2002; Docherty, Forslin, Shani & Kira, 2002). The emphasis of profitability and permanent restructuring create an organizational climate of pressure and insecurity in workers. These workers are more susceptible to stress and deterioration of their physical, psychological and mental well-being (Dejours 1980; Aubert and Pagès, 1989). The negative side effects are stress symptoms, self-exploitation tendencies, blurring boundaries between work and private life, burnout, and

eroding trust in management (Brödner, 2002; Docherty et al., 2002). Subjected to high tensions, workers feel threatened by an organization that requires increasingly more and ignore their tolerance (Fox, Dwyer & Ganster, 1993). Burnout among workers has various consequences and represents substantial costs for both individuals and organizations (Cordes & Dougherty 1993). Maslach and Leiter say "burnout does affect the organization's bottom line" (1997, s.65). The manifestation of stress often leads to a deterioration of the organizational climate and business performance (Cartwright & Cooper, 1994). Thus, burnout threatens organizational sustainability. Burnout has high costs as well for the society in the form of ever increasing social security expenses. According to a study by the International Labour Organization, the total cost of stress can represent from 1 to 3.5% of GDP in some Western countries (Hoel, Sparks & Cooper, 2001). Since burnout is becoming common among young workers who may fall out of the working life, the consequences for the society are even more serious.

The antecedents of burnout are researched on widely and many organizational and personal factors are identified. Interestingly, the most influential models do not have communication as a single root factor behind burnout. In this paper we propose that there are pathological communication patterns in the organizational culture which push some employees to burnout. One such pathological communication pattern is paradoxal communication. The ideal of "be excellent" is nowadays accompanied by a new mantra: "Do more with less". These two mantras may be experienced as a paradox, sometimes creating a double-bind that leads an employee to burnout. These paradoxes are typically undiscussable because such double-bind organizations operate with defensive organizational routines. Such organizations are not sustainable in the long term.

Thus, we will look into the pathological communication patterns preceding burnout and start our article by reviewing the organizational sustainability, the paradoxal demands of "do more with less" and "be excellent", the organizational culture of double-bind organizations, the organizational defensive routines, and burnout. Next, the IPA study of the experience of burnout among three ICT workers in Norway is presented as the case for burnout as a threat to organizational sustainability. Research design and IPA method are briefly described. Following this, parts of the data analysis that concern our context in this article are conveyed, followed by a discussion and conclusion.

ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

According to Dyllick and Hockerts (2002), the understanding of the term "sustainability" has been influenced by three stakeholder groups; ecologists, business strategists, and the United Nation's World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987), called the "Brundtland Commission". The latter added a social dimension to the ecological and economic ones: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987: 43). According to the first principle, human beings are at the core goals of sustainable development, "they are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature". Sustainable organizations have the capacity to endure and simultaneously satisfy a triple bottom line of economic, environmental and human performance (Spreitzer, Porath & Gibson, 2012).

Thus, sustainability has three dimensions which all imply also viability. Viability is the ability to maintain a separate existence (Beer, 1979, p.113). Sustainability of an organization can be described as long term viability and the ability to manage resources effectively so that one does not deplete or

Related Content

Ethics in Knowledge Dissemination
Damini Saini (2018). *Global Practices in Knowledge Management for Societal and Organizational Development (pp. 317-334).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/ethics-in-knowledge-dissemination/191049

Motivational Factors of Telework
Arlene J. Nicholas (2019). *Advanced Methodologies and Technologies in Business Operations and Management (pp. 350-365).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/motivational-factors-of-telework/212123

Mastering Employee Turnover Intention in the Modern Workforce
Kijpokin Kasemsap (2018). *Social Issues in the Workplace: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice (pp. 261-281).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/mastering-employee-turnover-intention-in-the-modern-workforce/192320

Exploring Business Ecosystem Dynamics Using Agile Structuration Theory
Ronald C. Beckettand Andrew O'Loughlin (2022). *Journal of Business Ecosystems (pp. 1-18).*
www.irma-international.org/article/exploring-business-ecosystem-dynamics-using-agile-structuration-theory/309126

Modification of Service Content for Evolution of Service Platform Ecosystems
Yuki Inoue, Takeshi Takenakaand Koichi Kurumatani (2020). *Journal of Business Ecosystems (pp. 1-19).*
www.irma-international.org/article/modification-of-service-content-for-evolution-of-service-platform-ecosystems/250361