

“ Employee angst, stress and burnout is a major business problem – and an immediate solution lies with active listening

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THE VALUE OF ACTIVE LISTENING

Merilee Kern provides expert tips to help leaders address the root causes of stress and burnout

Employee burnout is one of the greatest challenges facing the global economy with studies regularly showing that an overwhelming percentage of workers suffer from work-related stress and absence from work.

Not only does this lead to a drain on resources, which results in avoidable opportunity losses, it's also a major contributor to both mental and physical health problems of valuable employees.

While any number of interventions can address and resolve the employee burnout

epidemic, one solution is literally within earshot: active listening. Modern management must take a top-down approach to support staffers and not only hear what is being said but also actively listen to it.

A Harvard Business Review (HBR) study found that active listening is a key factor in improving leadership effectiveness. This in turn improves employee productivity, engagement and retention.

Conversely, failing to do so presents a mission critical missed opportunity to address and resolve the root causes of workforce stress and burnout.



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With employee burnout being widespread, aptly addressing the issue can seem daunting for managers. However, the urgency of the issue can apparently be mitigated with a clarified understanding of the common challenges that cause and exacerbate employee burnout.

According to the CEO of Hapi.com Adi Segal, here are five red flags that can be easily identified and resolved through active listening.

ISOLATION When employees feel isolated, their emotional state is compromised, and they are more likely to experience anxiety, stress and burnout – factors that can erode and impair a company's growth.

The remote work culture has only exacerbated this issue. In fact, CEO of Airbnb

Brian Chesky warned that “the most dangerous part of remote work isn't lost productivity – it's loneliness.”

Active listening can help leaders identify employees who are struggling with this issue, and take concerted steps to help them feel more connected to a manager and the team at large. Knowing that you belong, feeling you're an important part of something and understanding that your contributions are valued can produce a powerful and positive mindset.

RELATIONSHIPS Whether with respect to friends, colleagues, family or a significant other, relationship problems can cause considerable pain, trauma and strain that promote burnout.

By actively listening to employees, leaders can identify these types of issues and take proactive measures to address them before they become major problems for the worker, department and company.

MENTORSHIP Mentoring is an essential part of career development but navigating it can be challenging for both the mentors and mentees. Since many companies are stretched thin and workdays are overloaded with tasks, ‘free time’ is sometimes impossible to find.

However, it's imperative for leaders to engage in active listening moments to help identify these guidance gaps, and provide the necessary support, direction, assessment and praise to keep staffers on the right track.

INCOME LEVELS Often, an employee pool represents various socioeconomic segments and income levels. No matter what one's real or perceived status or salary is, everyone is at risk of struggling culturally and economically.

Active listening can be a profound form of activism. One report underscored the extent to which active listening can offer critical support to help people deal with intense and distressing emotions in relation to these particular issues, since they fundamentally impact nearly every aspect of our work, home and social lives.

POOR SOLUTIONS It would be an understatement to say that problem solving is a critical capability in the workplace. In fact, problem solving skills were cited as the most important soft skill of 2022 with 86 percent of employers reportedly seeking this attribute on resumes.

Since this vital skill is often hampered by communication breakdowns, active listening can help leaders identify the shortfalls, and bridge those gaps by providing the necessary understanding, explanation, support and guidance to ensure that all are on the same page.

Addressing employee burnout and related productivity pitfalls need not be rocket sci-

ence, says Segal. Here are some tactical strategies that can help address those problems.

PRACTISING As with any skill, listening ability correlates with frequency of use. Like working a muscle, it will get stronger over time.

Similarly, leaders should regularly schedule and conduct sessions with their employees to practise the art of listening rather than simply hearing what someone says.

TRAINING There are numerous emotional intelligence and active listening courses that leaders can provide their staff. Business executives should make listening certification an important part of their own and their team's professional development.

Such professional resources can help expedite the key learning needed to put this skill into meaningful practice, and positively impact people and the business bottom line.

RESOURCES With the advent of Certified Listening as a Service (CLaaS), managers can promote mental health (mHealth) apps and resources that increase access to care and human connectivity with 24/7 availability, lower the bar for entry, and simply provide a safe space for the team to vent, relieve stress, seek advice, bounce ideas or simply have company when they feel lonely or isolated.

mHealth platforms can be a boon for employee retention, recruitment and organizational transitions.

Segal notes: “Many psychologists admit that often, people dealing with work and life issues don't need therapy but rather, they simply need someone to talk to – someone who will truly listen, and provide the space for support, validation and exploration.”

Leaders need to establish and build upon a culture of engagement, collaboration and trust – the kind that can only be compelled through true active listening so that employees feel heard, valued and supported in a way that impedes burnout.

In turn, business and industry will realise a range of benefits from increased productivity and higher staff retention rates, to lower absenteeism and presenteeism.

Employee angst, stress and burnout is a major business problem – and an immediate solution lies with active listening. By committing to this learned and nuanced skill, leaders can readily address the root causes of these issues and ultimately facilitate a potent culture of caring.

Executives will soon see the ripple effects as these improvements drive employee satisfaction and revenue growth.

