Breaking the Burnout Cycle in (Efficient) Engineering Teams

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Burnout is pervasive in our industry, and has always been important to talk about

...but you probably already know that burnout is an important topic.

Senior leaders often have a really hard time seeing engineers as humans with needs.

Now it's 2023, and this tension is at a breaking point.

"We don't have time to invest in people and process right now."

- Senior Leadership

If you are:

- Feeling exhausted and overwhelmed trying to support your team under increased pressure and fewer resources
- Worried about someone on your team burning out (or burning out yourself)
- Ready to scream if one more person says we need to be "doing more with less"

This talk is for you!

Feel armed and empowered to protect your teams (and yourselves) by understanding how to:

- Recognize signs of burnout and support your team members through it
- Make your team more resilient to burnout in a way that resonates with senior leadership
- Not forget about yourself for the sake of your team

What is burnout?

Burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from **chronic workplace stress** that has not been successfully managed. It is characterised by three dimensions:

1. feelings of **energy depletion** or **exhaustion**;
2. increased **mental distance** from one's job, or feelings of **negativism or cynicism** related to one's job; and
3. a sense of **ineffectiveness** and **lack of accomplishment**.

(World Health Organization ICD-11)

42.1%

of tech employees are working under a high risk of burnout.

(Yerbo, The State of Burnout in Tech - 2022 Edition)

Burnout threatens team efficiency

- Less collaboration and teamwork
- Cynicism/negativity can permeate team interactions
- Increased risk of attrition
  - 42% of tech workers with high burnout risk said they wanted to leave their company in the next 6 months (Yerbo, The State of Burnout in Tech - 2022 Edition)

Keep in mind:

- We can't diagnose burnout. Be sure to consult with your people partner.
- We can still support individuals showing symptoms of burnout regardless of a diagnosis
- Burnout can look different for everyone

Two primary ways that people react when burning out: over-engaging or disengaging

The "Over-Engager"

The "Over-Engager"

- Exhaustion
  - Self-reported, and clear from hours worked
- Cynicism/Mental Distance
  - Negativity around the team and state of the company
  - Struggling to "disagree and commit" or compromise
- Ineffectiveness
  - Feeling a lack of accomplishment, even when praised for a job well done
  - Multi-tasking; things may be taking longer overall even though volume of work is high

Helping the "Over-Engager": leveraging 1:1s

- Bring it up early, if they don't bring it up themselves
    - "I've noticed you've been working a lot of extra hours lately, and expressing a lot of frustration around our work, and I wanted to check in."
- Make it a coaching conversation
    - "How have you been feeling lately?"
    - "What do you think has been keeping you up and working at night?"
    - "What's one thing that could make things slightly better?"

Helping the "Over-Engager"

- Exhaustion
  - Make space for time off (this will not cure burnout!)
  - Take things off their plate
  - Give positive feedback when helping others rather than doing everything independently
  - Set clear expectations around response time
  - Encourage work hour boundaries, communicating to the team (especially remote)
- Cynicism/Mental Distance
  - Listen to concerns without judgement or dismissal
  - Have a conversation around career goals and values, tie work back to it
- Ineffectiveness
  - Help with work prioritization
  - Minimize multitasking

Approaching senior leadership about the "Over-Engager"

- Do you have data that show the negative impacts on the company or team?
  - What are the immediate risks if the person doesn't get time off soon?
- How can the team step in to minimize the impact of an engineer stepping away?

The "Disengager"

The "Disengager"

- Exhaustion
  - Regularly taking time off
  - Struggling to get through a full day

- Cynicism/Mental Distance
  - Late, not participating in meetings
  - Less available to pair with the team

- Ineffectiveness
  - Tasks taking a long time, going in circles
  - Self-reported, aren't sure what to do

Helping the "Disengager": leveraging 1:1s

- Bring it up early, if they don't bring it up themselves
- Make it a coaching conversation
- Be mindful about feelings of ineffectiveness when discussing performance

Helping the "Disengager"

- Exhaustion
  - Make sure they're focused on one thing at a time
  - Make sure work is well-scoped
- Cynicism/Mental Distance
  - Encourage time to connect as a team
  - Chat with others about checking in with this engineer more frequently
- Ineffectiveness
  - Help with work prioritization
  - Ensure team has high ticket quality/definition of ready
  - Make sure there's dedicated space to learn
  - Set clear expectations around response time and completion of work

Approaching senior leadership about the "Disengager"

- Focus on measuring improvement
- Meet with them more frequently
- Set objective weekly goals together
  - Start simple, get some quick wins, then build

How do we make our teams more resilient to burnout?

Building resiliency: support developer well-being

Focus on core needs, encourage the team to build practices that support them

- **Belonging**: community, connection
- **Improvement**: progress, growth, helping others
- **Choice**: flexibility, autonomy, decision-making
- **Equality**: fairness
- **Predictability**: resources, time, direction
- **Significance**: sense of purpose

palomamedina.com/biceps for coaching and team check-in resources

Building resiliency: addressing the pressure for efficiency

- "Doing more with less" doesn't mean doing the same work with fewer people
- Efficiency is about maximizing impact for minimal effort

Building resiliency: focus on predictability

- Predictability is understanding the capacity of work for the team over a period of time
- Creates efficiency
  - Capacity as a data point helps shift focus to most impactful work
- Minimizes burnout risk
  - Sets reasonable expectations for the team based on data, minimizing excess pressure
  - Enables conversations that prioritize impactful work, addressing feelings of ineffectiveness

Building resiliency: focus on predictability

- Track work over time
  - Story points over sprints (average story points per engineer day)
    - Pointing discussions can improve efficiency
  - Look for trends, discuss outliers in retrospectives so the team can learn from them

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  - Ensure there's space to handle the unexpected – plan to 80%
  - Measure disruptions or escalations and make it visible, so it's clear how much it impacts progress
    - Toil doesn't usually decrease when team size decreases

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When we set realistic expectations and provide space for the unexpected, we've created space for an unplanned absence without impacting business goals

Supporting ourselves

- Find the things that recharge your capacity, and make space
- Think about efficiency for yourself
- Connect with your "first team" – your peer leaders
  - If you don't have a support network at work, look around you!

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Takeaways:

- Burnout is one of the biggest risks to creating more efficient teams
- Burnout presents itself in different ways, and can involve over-engaging or disengaging.
  - Bring it up early in 1:1s
  - Create a plan together
  - Address concerns of senior leadership by tying plans back to business goals and risks
- We can create more resilient teams through:
  - Well-being conversations and check-ins
  - Achieving team predictability, to shift the focus to maximizing the impact of a team's finite capacity
- We can protect ourselves by:
  - Prioritizing the most impactful work (recharging is impactful work!)
  - Leaning on our peers

Thanks!

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