

# Burnout in the Hospitality Industry: The case of a Restaurant Manager<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Burnout has been labeled as the largest occupational hazard of the twenty-first century (Karatepa et al., 2012). The burnout rate of people working in the hospitality industry is among the highest of all industries; it is estimated that every one in seven hotel and restaurant workers experience employee burnout (Hurley, 2015). This high rate of burnout may be due to the fact that hospitality front-line employees are constantly exposed to demanding customers and difficult situations, chronic stress in the workplace and long hours where they need to provide quality service for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (Bitner et al., 1994; Ledgerwood et al, 1998; Liang, 2012). Burnout has been formally defined as prolonged stress and frustration at work (Maslach et al., 2001; Shen and Huang, 2012). It leads to undesirable outcomes such as lower organizational commitment, job dissatisfaction, increased absenteeism, diminished job performance and turnover intentions (Karatepa et al., 2012).

Even successful managers who have been working in the hospitality industry for many years, experience job burnout from time to time, causing them to leave the industry and creating many vacant positions. These positions are then filled by less experienced managers who have not yet learned the intricacies of the business (Krone, et al., 1989). While the hospitality industry then suffers quite a loss, other industries are benefitting from this exodus of workers capitalizing on their skills, knowledge and experience. The wisdom, human resource knowledge, as well as the tactical and strategic skills that seasoned managers bring with them are highly sought after in any service related industry. This phenomenon is taking its toll on the hospitality industry as organizations must then begin searching, hiring and training new (inexperienced) managers again (Krone et al., 1989). On the other hand, if employees are highly engaged in the organization without being burnt-out, they will perform better, which will result in increased financial returns due to quality service delivery and satisfied customers. Engaged employees will therefore provide the organization with increased revenues while burnt-out employees will reduce revenues.

The case study introduces Mark Moore, a 50-year-old Supervisory Level Restaurant Manager who is experiencing burnout at work. Mark is considering leaving his current position or leaving the hospitality

industry completely. Mark has also worked on improving his qualifications and has been recently awarded a Master's Degree in Hospitality Management from a leading university in the USA. Although Mark is passionate about his work and the hospitality industry, he no longer feels appreciated by his organization. He also does not see any professional advancement opportunities in the foreseeable future. This case study will discuss the following questions:

- What are the symptoms of and reasons for Mark's burnout?
- If you were to design a personal plan for Mark, what five strategies would you suggest to him to work on in order to overcome his burnout?
- Should Mark approach his management team and discuss his burnout situation?
- How can his organization better help Mark with his burnout challenges?

## Theoretical Foundation

Burnout is defined as a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors in the workplace (Maslach et al., 2001). It entails a stage characterized by a lack of productivity and achievement at work (Liang, 2012). Furthermore, burnout represents the mismatch that occurs between what a person should do at work and what the person would like to do. Therefore, there is a significant disharmony between the nature of a person's job and the characteristics of the person doing the job (Liang, 2012). Three dimensions define burnout more specifically: exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach et al., 2001). Exhaustion occurs when a person's feelings are overextended and a person's physical and emotional resources are depleted. Cynicism refers to uncaring and negative attitudes toward the various aspects of the job and other people, while inefficacy entails a deterioration of self-confidence. Research found that 72% of employees are very stressed, 67% are considering switching their careers, 85% say that their jobs are intruding on their home lives, and 42% are losing sleep because of work (Stern, 2012). Maslach et al. (2001) describe "six areas of work life that encompass the central relationships with burnout: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values"

<sup>1</sup> This is hypothetical scenario based case study that was written for the purposes of classroom discussions. It was not intended to show effective or ineffective handling of decisions or to interrogate a managerial situation. Published materials and academic sources were used in the preparation of this case study.

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(Maslach et al., 2001, p. 414), and conclude that “burnout arises from chronic mismatches between people and their work setting in terms of some or all of these six areas” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 414).

Burnout is common among hospitality employees and managers in the hospitality industry who are in constant contact with people and who have high guest interaction levels (Buick and Thomas, 2001). The research findings based on a survey where data was collected from workers in New Zealand show that burnout is the main cause of job dissatisfaction in most areas of the hospitality industry (Neill et al., 2015). Food and beverage managers’ report higher burnout levels than any managers of other hospitality departments (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Together with the increase of manager burnout in the hospitality industry, turnover is increasing to between 54%-60% per year in the USA (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Research in the area of burnout in the hospitality industry is hardly new; in fact Niehouse (1984) identified three characteristics that distinguish candidates who are likely to experience burnout. The author found that burnout candidates predominantly experience stress caused by job-related stressors; they tend to be idealistic and/or self-motivated achievers; and they seek out unattainable goals. Piedmont (1993), Dreary (2003) and Storm and Rothmann (2003) found a direct link between high levels of neuroticism and high levels of depersonalization and emotional exhaustion. Managers experience emotional exhaustion and depersonalization especially if they are already predisposed to feelings of anxiety, depression, and if they are unable to deal with stress (Piedmont, 1993). Dreary (2003) found that emotional exhaustion is often experienced by individuals who exhibit high levels of neuroticism and those who are emotion-oriented. Sometimes burnout occurs in individuals who show low openness to experience, those

who exhibit high levels of neuroticism, low levels of conscientiousness, and low levels of extraversion (Storm and Rothmann, 2003).

“The biggest price companies’ pay for burnout is a loss of talented people” - this is according to John Izzo, the author of Values-Shift: The New Work Ethic and What It Means for Business. He notes that “as the economy improves, they will leave the enterprise” (Izzo and Withers, 2001). Burnt-out individuals are seen as the “working wounded” and according to Stern (2012) these employees “show up to work but have lost their motivation and are just trying to get through the day unscathed”. In this regard Maslach and Leiter (1998) proposed a model which specified the developmental sequence of burnout in three dimensions: Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP), and Personal Accomplishment (PA). They propose that these dimensions appear in sequence. EE appears first, as chronic excessive work demands drain an individual’s emotional resources (Boles, et al., 2000, p. 14). During the DP stage, employees “limit their involvement with others and distance themselves psychologically” as a coping strategy. After this state, employees see that there is a “discrepancy between their original optimistic attitude and their current attitude”, and recognizing this discrepancy leads to the final stage of burnout whereas employees start “experiencing a feeling of inadequacy” towards others (Boles, et al., 2000, p. 14). This diminished PA becomes a cycle that affects their job performance. The consequences are a tendency to look for other job opportunities with a concomitant desire to decrease their working hours (Kuruüzüm et al., 2008).

As soon as burnout is identified and understood, preventative measures can be proposed (Niehouse, 1984; Stern, 2012). Steps to reduce burnout include having employees and managers work fewer

**Table 1**

### Five ways to combat worker burnout

<b>Reach Out</b>	Gauge employee workloads, happiness, and balance.
	When workers feel listened to they are more likely to be productive at work. When ignored, employees are likely to be less engaged.
<b>Encourage them to recharge</b>	To ensure that employees are productive in the long run, make sure they get sufficient rest and relaxation.
	Ensure employees that they will not be punished for taking time off.
	Ensure employees that they are valued and must recharge their batteries.
<b>Explore flexible work arrangements</b>	Employees will feel less exhausted if they have flexible work arrangements.
	Offering flexible work arrangements makes your organization more attractive in the eyes of job candidates.
	A great way to reward employees when it is difficult to offer lavish monetary benefits is flexible work arrangements. Examples may include: alternative schedules, compressed workweeks, job sharing.
<b>Improve wellness initiatives</b>	A great way to attract potential candidates is a good wellness program.
<b>Increase performance reviews</b>	Reviews should be done regularly. They are highly beneficial and ensure that employees are engaged and feel valued (key points to preventing burnout).

Source: Adapted from Ferrara (2009), Ronald et al. (2008) and Stern (2012)

hours and making suggestions that can reevaluate and improve their working conditions (Kuruüzüm et al., 2008). Unfortunately, senior leaders feel there is not much that they can do about burnout except to hire more managers to decrease working hours for other managers in hospitality (Krone, et al., 1989). On the supervisory level, managers who work in the industry simply seem to try to move up the ladder as quickly as possible with a view to delegate responsibility to those below them, thus avoiding the long hours and burnout (Krone, et al., 1989). However, in order to take a positive step towards resolving burnout issues, companies should address it by asking staff members what changes they would like to see; as such an approach will help to develop problem-solving techniques (Stern, 2012).

Companies should consider eliminating unnecessary tasks or limiting lengthy meetings to no more than 15 minutes along with emphasizing wellness programs that will help staff reduce stress and give them a sense of purpose (Stern, 2012). Ronald et al. (2008) suggest that companies should provide employees with workshops and courses on emotional management to delve into the reasons as to why employees cannot successfully display emotional labor behaviors. Such courses may include one-on-one interviews with employees. If employers find that their employees have performance issues caused by low motivation, they can use motivational approaches to increase performance (Ronald, et al., 2008). Jason Ferrara, VP of Corporate Marketing at CareerBuilder.com also offers five more ways to combat worker burnout (Ferrara, 2009). His strategies are shown in Table 1. These can be considered when tackling the issue of employee burnout in hospitality organizations.

### **Case: Background to Mark Moore**

Mark Moore has been working for his organization for over 16 years. He started in 1999 by opening his first restaurant for the organization. Mark received his Bachelor's Degree from Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science. He started his career as a design consultant for a mid-sized textile-converting firm in Sydney, Australia and then moved to New York to work as a costume pattern maker. During his time as a pattern maker he also worked nights as a waiter to earn extra cash. After working as a costume pattern maker for three years, Mark decided to earn a Master's Degree in Education. He started but did not finish this degree. Mark was working full-time at local bars around New York until he was offered the position at his current organization. After working for five years, Mark was approached to fill a supervisory role as a floor manager. Mark accepted the role and subsequently managed Blues Café restaurant/nightclub. During his tenure at Blues Café, Mark was told repeatedly by his senior manager that if and when there would be any opportunity for promotion, Mark would be the first one to be considered for the position. However, when there was an opportunity for promotion, Mark was not offered the position and it went to a manager hired from outside the organization.

This left Mark with feelings of inadequacy.

Over the years, Mark has worked in many restaurants/bars and has paid his way through his undergraduate studies by working in the hospitality business. He was always drawn back to this industry during periods of his life when a change was needed. Thus, instead of leaving the position and the industry and shedding his feelings of inadequacy, Mark decided that he would pursue a Master's Degree in Hospitality Management, sponsored by his organization. Mark thought that this would give him an advantage and make him more marketable within his current organization and also to future employers.

When speaking to Mark, one observes that after 16 plus years at the current organization, he shows some signs of burnout. For many years, Mark has found his work challenging and exciting, but he sometimes felt he was hitting a wall. However, he has always found ways around it. Now he is beginning to feel that he is hitting the walls more frequently, and he needs too much time and effort to get over them, and the recovery time between hits is too short. In essence, Mark feels bored and inadequate. He believed that when he completed his Master's Degree in hospitality, he would find a more exciting and challenging position within the organization or elsewhere. However, these positions are not materializing and Mark is beginning to feel depressed and anxious. Mark now exhibits various symptoms of burnout as described by Maslach and Leiter (2005). At first, he did not realize that the exhaustion he felt (hourly, daily and weekly) were symptoms of emotional exhaustion, caused by "chronic excessive work demands" that have drained his "emotional resources" (Boles et al., 2000, p. 14). Lately, as a coping strategy, Mark has also found himself limiting his involvement with others and distancing himself psychologically from his colleagues, especially his superiors.

Mark considers himself a very good fit for the role and feels that he is still fulfilling his duties towards guests and those he supervises, but he is becoming more reckless with the words he uses and more negative towards his superiors. He feels that it is only a matter of time until he will start seeing a discrepancy between his original optimistic attitude and his current attitude. Now that he has recognized this discrepancy, he knows that the reason why he is avoiding his managers is because he is reaching the final stage of burnout which entails that he is experiencing feelings of inadequacy towards them. Mark feels fortunate that he has a highly desirable and well-paid position where he can make a nominal difference in the organization. Additionally, Mark has full health insurance, ten paid holidays per year, four weeks of vacation per year, two personal days per year, 400 hours of paid sick time, plus five paid days to use when needed.

From an outsider's point of view, it may seem that Mark is successful. However, Mark would be willing to give up some of the aforementioned benefits if he were able to find a more challenging job that better suits his needs. Mark knows the saying that the 'grass is always greener on the

other side' but he feels that this position is no longer providing him the means to be content in his life. Also, he feels that earning his Master's Degree should be a beacon for employers to seek him out and offer him a more suitable position. At this point, however, Mark has applied for about 30 positions for which he is clearly qualified, yet he has only received rejection from within and outside of his organization.

Recently, Mark scored significantly lower on a biennial '360' evaluation than in a previous '360s'. Mark does not really care any longer about his 360 evaluations. This cycle of not caring due to burnout as defined by the third dimension (feelings of reduced personal accomplishment - see Boles et al., 2000) is justified. He feels that his decreased feelings of competence and his negative self-evaluation has been proven by the people who evaluated him. At the age of 50, in light also of his feeling that moving abroad is not a viable option, Mark is ready to leave New York behind and live closer to the coast in a quieter semi-urban area. Given the above information, Mark would also have no problem remaining in New York as he has built a life here and has a considerable number of friends and colleagues. He is involved in a long-term relationship and his partner is more than happy to move anywhere in the United States or Europe as his partner telecommutes. Mark sometimes also thinks about lecturing at a community college after he retires. However, the main challenge now is how he can overcome his burnout.

## **Concluding Thoughts and Discussion Questions**

Similar too many employees and managers in the hospitality industry, Mark Moore is one of the 'working wounded' individuals suffering from burnout. Mark's mental and physical burnout is due to repetitive work causing boredom, thus exhaustion. His values no longer align with his organization's values and no professional or personal growth is likely to take place in him in the foreseeable future. As the organization has offered little to no professional growth opportunities in the past few years, his only accomplishment, while extremely relevant, was obtaining his Master's Degree in Hospitality Management. It is now important to develop solutions to help the 'working wounded' like Mark who are suffering from burnout in the hospitality industry. These solutions may include a personal plan for Mark, some strategies that will help him overcome burnout and the role his organization's management team should play to assist him. Several questions can help us analyze the case study and generate discussions.

- What are the symptoms and reasons for Mark's burnout?
- If you were to design a personal plan for Mark, what five strategies would you suggest to him to work on in order to overcome his burnout?
- Should Mark approach his management team and discuss his burnout situation?
- How can his organization better help Mark with his burnout challenges?