Exploring Passion at Work and Burnout in Higher Education

By Rebecca Pope-Ruark(https://www.academic-leader.com/author/al-pope-ruark/) | May 5, 2025

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> "Work is probably the single most important activity in one's life . . . work serves to define us . . . While some people may not care that much about work as they merely see it as labor, others see it as part of who they are deep down, it becomes part of their identity. They love their work, and it has become part of who they are."
>
> —Vallerand and Houlfort (2003, p. 176)

I fell down a rabbit hole recently. Despite trying to convince myself that I had collected enough literature to be able to start writing my new book on women's leadership and burnout in higher education, I read this article (https://hbr.org/2019/07/when-passion-leads-to-burnout) in the *Harvard Business Review* about passion for work and had to track down the study by Robert J. Vallerand and colleagues that inspired it (which then led to reading a chunk of the research on passion at work). In that study, "On the Role of Passion for Work in Burnout: A Process Model, (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/43532701_On_the_Role_of_Passion_for_Work_in_Burnout_A_Process_Model)" the authors argue that past research on burnout cannot "explain why, in the same environment, one individual is thriving whereas another one is experiencing burnout symptoms" (p. 290).

This exact thought has long troubled me as I work with faculty across the country about burnout, burnout resilience, and compassionate leadership, especially when I think about my own severe burnout experience. Why exactly did I burn out as a tenured faculty member when so many others do just fine with the chronic stress of higher ed? Popular business press articles continued to tell me my burnout wasn't my fault, but while other faculty at my institution were certainly stressed out, none of them, as far as I knew, needed medical leave and career change to address burnout like I did.

The literature on burnout from and inspired by the work of Christina Maslach and colleagues like Michael Leiter maintains that burnout is a workplace culture problem and the result of mismatches between

worker and workplace characteristics. In their book, *The Burnout Challenge* (https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674251014), Maslach and Leiter explore the six most validated mismatches: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values (see my October 2022 article for an examination of these mismatches (https://www.academic-leader.com/topics/institutional-culture/burnout-revisited-six-cultural-factors-to-consider/)). We can certainly see these elements at play in many of the challenges faculty face in higher education—crushing workloads, salaries that don't match the effort success requires, cultures that foster competition rather than collaboration, and so on.

But if, as the research says, burnout is a culture problem not an individual problem, why was I the one who "cracked"? And what does that mean for leaders like my department chair, who had been worried about me for a long time but didn't know how to approach me? Tassell and Flett (2007) (https://doi.org/10.1375/jrc.13.2.101) argue that there are personal factors that may mediate how people internalize chronic stress that leads to burnout, including an individual's "coping strategies, social support, personality factors, and health-impairing behaviors" such as smoking and drinking (p. 103). And the literature on passion at work gives more clues.

Examining passion at work

As the quote I used to introduce this article claims, work, for many of us in capitalistic societies, has become a core part of our identities, not just a way to make money to fund life outside work. In many ways, workaholism has assumed the roles religion and community used to play in many of our lives as the guiding forces to which we look for fulfillment and human connection. This is true for many academics as we are socialized as graduate students to see our identities hinge on our scholarly personas and the twists and turns of life in all-consuming academia.

Vallerand and Houlfort (2003) define passion as "a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy" (p. 177). They argue that passion is a key determinant and underlying motivation that drives people to strive for excellence by putting time and energy into their chosen activity—work, in this case. But as passion-at-work researchers note, passion is a double-edged sword.

Vallerand and colleagues (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2009.00616.x?casa_token=vrXSkUPrLMQAAAAA%3ARFSpwfwfXdBaDWEGIn4y2PAZTaVNiHBQhy6ZvNKQ-yNNBbFlbwmQXL0wTK6-_UdWLaAFA66mu-gNK7o)(2010) developed the dualistic theory of passion, which claims there are two main types of passion at work—harmonious and obsessive—and which type of passion you exhibit toward your work can be an important indicator of the likelihood of burnout. They argue,

> Being passionate for one's work can lead one to be consumed by one's work, thereby leading to the experience of conflict with other life activities and eventually to suffering from burnout. However, passion can also provide one with the energy to fully engage in one's work and to derive satisfaction from it while still fully pursuing other life interests that should protect one from burnout. So it would appear that passion can either facilitate or prevent the occurrence of burnout at work. (p. 290)

Obsessive passion is the first type described in this quote. Those with obsessive passion for work are motivated by compulsion to do the work they enjoy and find meaning in but can't see their lives without that particular work, to the point that it interferes with their ability to "switch off" and enjoy other aspects of their lives (Vallerand & Houlfort, 2003; Curran et al., 2015 (https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11031-015-9503-0)). The research shows that obsessive passion often results in negative affect and even shame and anxiety.

Those experiencing harmonious passion, by contrast, engage in the work they love by choice rather than compulsion, meaning they actively choose when to work and when to fully engage in other aspects of their lives; they do not define themselves solely on the basis of their work, but work is a harmonious part of their larger life and identity; and those with harmonious passion can easily find themselves in positive flow states as they immerse themselves in the work they love (Vallerand & Houlfort, 2003; Curran et al.; Lavigne et al., 2015 (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1359432X.2011.578390)).

While the research shows that those with both obsessive and harmonious passion are productive at work and can be high performers, obsessively passionate individuals seem to not be able to "fully enjoy their work" and find their emotional energy and mental resilience restricted at work (Trépanier et al., 2014, p. 363 (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262840074_Linking_Job_Demands_and_Resources_to_Burnout_and_Work_Engagement_Does_Passion_Underlie_these_Differe
Vallerand and colleagues (2010) found that harmonious passion related positively to work satisfaction and negatively to conflict in other areas of one's life, therefore helping people with this type of passion to thrive while at work and unplug at the end of the day. Obsessive passion, however, negatively predicted work satisfaction and positively predicted conflict, which are both associated with burnout.

What does all this mean for people in higher ed who, like me, burned out or are burning out? And just as

importantly, what can leaders do with this knowledge to better support their colleagues experiencing burnout?

Extending passion to leadership action

When I look back at my pre-burnout faculty career, I easily identify with the obsessively passionate profile. My identity and self-worth were wrapped up in my work and public profile. I worked obsessively around the clock to the detriment of friends, family, and hobbies. I often felt depressed during the summer because there wasn't enough to do and no one "needed" me the way they did during the academic year. And as much as I loved the work I was doing, the less and less it began to satisfy my emotional needs. When I finally pushed myself too far, burnout was waiting.

I've talked to hundreds of burned-out faculty and leaders in the past five years, and a not-insignificant number of them likely fall into this obsessively passionate category as well. But passion is a deeply personal matter; you can't necessarily manage or lead other people to behave in harmoniously passionate ways. Vallerand and Houlfort (2003) hypothesize that creating "a healthy, flexible, secure work environment" where people's opinions are valued "will create the conditions that facilitate the development of harmonious passion" (p. 193). What might that look like for academic departments?

In my work with faculty, I find that many wish their departments had open discussions about topics like workload, collegiality and respect, equity in the distribution of teaching and service work, and expectations for promotion and tenure. These are subjects that often lead to a lot of tension and stress that open dialogue can address or alleviate. Honest discussions about self-care and holistic well-being can be valuable even if not immediately seen as such; self-care can sound like a "fluffy" topic, but addressing it as taking care of one's physical and mental health in the service of both work and nonwork may get through to people.

Chairs may need additional training in how to have compassionate conversations with colleagues who are experiencing the negative aspects of chronic stress; that would give them a better understanding of what burnout is clinically and how to have an uncomfortable conversation with a colleague they are concerned for. A session on harmonious and obsessive passion at work could have value as well for chairs and for faculty to think about how they show up at work and whether their current motivations are healthy and conducive to good lives overall.

As the mental and emotional health of faculty and staff surfaces on institutional radars (https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2025/01/15/call-invest-faculty-and-staff-well-being-opinion), leaders will find that supporting faculty and staff well-being becomes a larger part of the job than it may have been in the past, and part of that work is harnessing healthy passion for work and life outside of work.

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