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Having a Compassionate Conversation with a Burned-Out Colleague

By Rebecca Pope-Ruark(https://www.academic-leader.com/author/al-pope-ruark/) | November 4, 2024

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If you've read these pages in the past three years, you've seen me write a lot about burnout and its impact on faculty well-being and institutional culture. The World Health Organization (2019) defines *burnout* (https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases) as "a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed." It has three defining characteristics: chronic exhaustion, increased mental distance or cynicism toward the job, and reduced job efficacy (or the perception of such).

In my book *Unraveling Faculty Burnout* (https://www.press.jhu.edu/books/title/12574/unraveling-faculty-burnout), I share extensively about my personal experience as a tenured faculty member with burnout, and when I talk about that experience with faculty and campus leaders during workshops, I often reveal that, upon my "coming out" about it to my colleagues, my department chair (a senior colleague nearing retirement) and two senior faculty members in my office suite told me that they had been worried about me for a long time. My suitemates said they noticed that I was always sick, spent increasing amounts of time away from my office or behind closed door, and had grown cynical in how I communicated about my students and department operations. My department chair told me she'd been worried about me for years, feeling that the goals I was setting for myself in my annual self-evaluations (goals that I was achieving) were overly ambitious and not necessary for where I was in my career at the institution.

My point? They said all this *after* I burned out. No one talked to me while they were noticing these changes in my behavior, despite telling me they had been worried after the fact. No one told me I was stretching well beyond reasonable stretch goals and pushing myself into career oblivion.

Now, whether I would have listened to their concerns with open ears had they spoken to me before the Mack truck of burnout hit me, I honestly don't know. I was ambitious and thought I knew my limits (reader, I did not). But maybe they could have planted a seed. Maybe I would have done a little research and seen myself in the burnout definition before I crashed. It might have thought about slowing down and taking better care of myself. I don't know. But I wonder: What responsibility do senior faculty and faculty leaders have to support colleagues who may need

mental health help?

One question I get asked quite a bit in workshops I do for faculty and campus leaders is, How do I talk to someone I'm worried about? The odds are, if you are a department chair, for example, that at least one of your faculty will burn out during your tenure. After working with leaders across the country, I do believe that it is the responsibility of leaders to say something if they are concerned about a colleague. Those conversations are not easy or comfortable. They may not be well received or even listened to. But had someone talked to me, my life might be very different.

So, what do you need to know to have a compassionate conversation with a colleague you suspect might be experiencing burnout? The literature gives us a place to start. A *Harvard Business Review* Idea Brief on compassionate leadership (https://www.harvardbusiness.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Compassionate-Leadership-How-to-Do-Hard-Things-in-a-Human-Way-Idea-Brief.pdf) lists five characteristics that leaders must display when going into a potentially difficult but caring conversation with someone they supervise:

- **Presence**. You are there with your colleague to actively listen, asking questions to understand their experience and needs, not to problem-solve in the moment. Burnout can feel shameful in a culture that values hustle and entrepreneurialism like academia does, and if the colleague hasn't recognized they might be burned out, it may be difficult for them to initially process the reason for the meeting. Or they might be in denial and not ready to listen. Your role is to be a caring presence in the room.
- **Courage**. As a leader, you have likely become OK with being uncomfortable in difficult situations, but because of the very personal nature of this conversation, you really need to be comfortable being uncomfortable. You don't know how the colleague is going to react, and emotions might be heightened for them. Being compassionate in this situation takes courage to not try to solve the problem but understand it with the colleague.
- **Directness**. Your colleague might not understand why you have asked to meet with them or trust you concern for them, so don't beat around the bush: say the hardest thing first and give them time to process in the moment. Share that, for example, you have noticed some concerning changes in their behavior, and you wanted to make sure they were alright. You could add that you've done some learning about burnout and wonder whether they might be experiencing it. Be sure you explain that they are not in trouble (if that is the case and the negative behaviors are not affecting the

unit), but you are meeting with them out of collegial concern. Accept whatever their reaction is.

- **Transparency**. If the colleague is open to conversation, explore your specific concerns. If there are goals they should or are choosing to shoot for, discuss those and, for example, how they are (over)working to achieve them. If doing so seems reasonable or welcome, share boundaries or guidelines you have for yourself to maximize productivity without overworking. Explore your concerns, any options they might consider for addressing the concerns, and, if relevant to the situation, consequences if behaviors continue, especially if the individual is disrupting the unit more broadly.
- **Readiness to act**. Understand going into the conversation that actions may need to be taken once you have spoken with the colleague. Before the meeting, refresh yourself on tools that might be useful, like the mental health benefits of the university's employee assistance program or leave guidelines. Know what you might be able to offer if necessary—Is a course release in your purview? Can you excuse them from service for a semester? Are you willing to talk with the dean on the colleague's behalf? Be open to meaningful action based on whatever comes up in the conversation. And know that the colleague might not need or want you to act; don't go immediately into problem-solving mode unless the colleague asks you to. They may benefit just from being heard and knowing someone is concerned about them.

Even more specifically, Noémie Le Pertel shared in a *Harvard Business Review* article (https://hbr.org/2023/05/when-your-employee-tells-you-theyre-burned-out) five suggestions for having a conversation with a burned-out colleague as a supervisor, especially if they come to you on their own. I share these tips with my own summaries:

1. Treat your colleague's burnout concerns seriously. Don't assume the colleague is exaggerating or is just overwhelmed. Hear them out.
2. Understand the colleague's experience of burnout. Ask them whether they are feeling more exhausted than usual or more cynical or caring less, and whether they feel competent and effective in their role. This will help gauge the level of burnout.
3. Help them identify the causes of the burnout. Are there specific stressors, duties, or committees, classes, or roles at the root of the burnout?
4. Consider short- and long-term solutions to the stressors. Ask what might help them now and what might help in the long term. You don't have to solve their problems in this meeting (nor is that always your role), but help them think

about options, both in-house and external, like mental or physical health care.

5. Create a mentoring plan. Work with the colleague to imagine the state of well-being they want to achieve and create a plan to help them work toward that.

Keeping in mind how to show up for a compassionate conversation and these additional possible steps can make a difficult interaction less challenging and hopefully valuable for the colleague for whom you are concerned.

Rebecca Pope-Ruark, PhD, is the director of the Office of Faculty Professional Development at Georgia Tech in Atlanta. She is the author of Agile Faculty: Practical Strategies for Research, Service, and Teaching *(Chicago, 2017) and* Unraveling Faculty Burnout: Pathways to Reckoning and Renewal *(Johns Hopkins, 2022).*

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