

Rust Out – The warning signs and what to do about them

In September last year, in the UK, sickness had hit the highest levels they have been for 10 years with mental health issues being within the top four causes of sick leave – and arguably contributing to the other top three. However, when we think of mental ill health or stress at work, ‘burnout’ naturally comes to mind.

Indeed, many people are burning the candle at both ends; many are feeling extreme levels of pressure and demand; and many feel that there isn’t always the outlet or support that they need – or find accessible – when it comes to workplace stress. However, ‘too much’ stress isn’t the only issue, too little can be just as problematic.

Enter – Rust Out

Rust Out was the name applied to the boredom experienced by employees by Paula Coles (2019) when they do *‘Work which is uninspiring and fails to stretch the person, so that they become disinterested, apathetic and alienated.’* The term rust out further works on a metaphorical level with regards to why something gets rusty. It is notable that while burnout is active – it is about trying to do more than is possible until there is no energy left – a rusty object doesn’t necessarily actively choose to rust...it is left to rust by careless

owners. As such, while there is a place for individual as well as systemic changes to address burnout, when it comes to rust out the influence of the leader is clear.

As leaders it is as much a responsibility as a motivator to be aware of the work that your teams are doing and ensure that it is engaging and meaningful – as much as it can be, OR that opportunities are offered to increase those elements. If tweaks need to be made to a job role, or injecting more purpose and meaning into the work can be done in collaboration with the employee it's an opportunity to build trust and rapport, as well as improve performance and productivity. Someone who feels 'meh', underappreciated or underused can become just as unwell as someone who has taken on too much. While on the one hand it is possible to say 'but why doesn't someone ask for more work' – it may also be that the work they are doing is consuming all of their time so they do not have the capacity to take on more, even if it is more stimulating.

To borrow a model from trauma research, Dan Siegal described the state of optimal arousal that a person can function within as the 'window of tolerance'. For Siegal too much would lead to hyper arousal (eg. stress, anxiety), too little to hypo arousal (eg. depression and apathy) – however, the window of tolerance varies for each individual.

Signs to recognise Rust Out

These are not dissimilar to burnout as the stress response is often the same, it is just the cause which differs:

Psychological signs

- Irritability

- Tearfulness

- Inability to focus/zoning out

Social signs

- Not voicing concerns or stopped talking to management despite an open door policy

- Refusing invitations, or alternatively going to all of them and perhaps over-indulging in a noticeable manner (that differs from their usual behaviour)

Biological signs

Susceptibility to illness (often because of a depression of the immune system)

...or other signs indicative of potential physical health issues

Practical signs

Missing deadlines (when they have otherwise been on time)

Not volunteering for something (again when they would otherwise have done so) – or alternatively consistently seeking things that would get them involved, when previously they have always gone home on time

Work which is not to their usual standards

Verbal signs

Phrases such as “I wish I could just stop” or “I just need to be somewhere else” – seemingly throwaway phrases, but if they are said often enough, this can be a prompt to ask “Are you OK?”... twice!

All of these signs may be indicators of other issues, BUT, they are also commonly related to stress. It is also worth noting that when people are feeling depressed, or anxious, they may use smiling or the dismissive (eg “I’m fine”) behaviour to cope – it is important to acknowledge negative feelings and accept that you are not strange or a burden or just being silly, stress, depression and anxiety are very real – and voicing concerns means they can be addressed.

Addressing Rust Out

Gen Z, people who were furloughed in the pandemic, and those who may not get the chance to become involved in company culture can find they lack an understanding about how the organisation, and sometimes the field itself functions, which can limit self-development and future prospects and impact enjoyment of the workplace. However, “demanding people return to the office” is not the solution – it is about providing the best experience when they are there – something which their own personal network may not provide.

...and sometimes the solution is practical rather than psychological

Herzberg et al (1959) used the term 'hygiene' with the same meaning of 'medical hygiene' – factors within a job that are needed to remove health hazards. They included:

Fair Salary

Status, supervision and security

Healthy relationships with colleagues and conditions of the working environment

For Herzberg, without fair pay, a healthy pace of work, and positive relationships in an environment conducive to work, your teams are also likely to become unwell. These hygiene factors are essential to avoid ill-being – or job dissatisfaction.

However, Herzberg also added that there were a number of motivating factors which contributed to job satisfaction. They included:

Achievement and Recognition

Opportunity for advancement and growth

Responsibility and meaning or enjoyment of the work itself

The two are not mutually exclusive – they need to exist together.

Reflect on your current job offering to your teams

1. *On a scale of 0 (middle) to 10 (outside), where are they experiencing any of those elements?*
2. *How can you notch up the lower elements by one?*
3. *Do it*

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