



# Understanding and Addressing Stress, Exhaustion & Burnout at Work

By

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As the Australian and global economy enters a challenging time with interest rates rising, financial market instability, and rampantly high petrol prices – Australian workers seem to be working harder and longer than ever in recent memory. The relentless demands and challenges faced by Australian employees in an uncertain time often have deleterious effects on the health of our staff, with disastrous effects on productivity and performance. Workplace Managers are reporting alarming levels of stress, mental exhaustion, and burnout at work.

Recent scientific research undertaken by Christopher Shen Consulting and Simon Moss at Monash University reveals some interesting and innovative findings about workplace stress, and proffers some helpful and surprising recommendations for Managers to alleviate stress amongst their staff in the workplace.

## Research Finding

Research demonstrates that a sense of stress, exhaustion, and burnout at work tends to arise when employees feel their careers are vulnerable. This vulnerability is especially prevalent in volatile and ambiguous environments. This anxiety provokes

considerable workplace stress and is pronounced when the skills and abilities of employees are not suited to other departments or organisations; that is, if they lost their job, they fear their success in their career would decline dramatically.

## **Recommendation for Managers**

To curb stress, mental exhaustion, and burnout, employees should first be encouraged to identify skills and abilities they have developed that individuals in other workgroups or departments might also want to acquire, perhaps to enhance their future job prospects in other organisations. For example, accountants might feel that colleagues in other workgroups or departments might want to acquire bookkeeping skills if they plan to launch their own business in the future.

Second, employees should present workshops that enable colleagues to acquire these skills. This approach – which encourages employees to interact with colleagues in other departments as well as fosters the development of diverse skills – will tend to alleviate burnout.

## **Research Finding**

Public speaking in the workplace often provokes great anxiety and insecurity for employees. Indeed, public speaking is often reported as a debilitating and terrifying prospect for many Australian workers.

While public speaking, some individuals experience alarm with the physical symptoms of their stress and become concerned their cheeks might flush, their heart rate might increase, their stomach might rumble, and they might also begin to stammer or feel faint. These employees genuinely fear their symptoms could disrupt their performance. They will often unsuccessfully attempt to stifle symptoms they feel could exacerbate their anxiety and undermine their performance. This attempt to suppress symptoms, however, tends to increase their magnitude and they become even more pronounced.

Scientific research indicates individuals who intentionally magnify and publicise the symptoms of this anxiety of public speaking, often feel more relaxed. This phenomenon is called paradoxical intention.

## **Recommendation for Managers**

Employees who report anxiety and stress in public speaking should be encouraged by Managers to exaggerate and publicise the stressful symptoms. They should deliberately strive to blush, and draw their audience's attention in a self-deprecating way to their flushed cheeks, rumbling stomach, or stuttering speech for example. These individuals should attempt to exaggerate, rather than mask, these symptoms.

## **Research Finding**

When workload is elevated, many employees experience stress, exhaustion and burnout. Importantly, scientific research indicates that element of choice is a significant factor in the degree to which an employee experiences stress.

Individuals are more likely to feel enthusiastic, determined, and persistent after they are granted complete choice over which workplace tasks to complete. Their determination declines however, if they receive no choice over which activities to pursue. In particular, employees are sometimes granted unqualified choice to select which tasks they would like to complete. These individuals do not feel the need to regulate and maintain their focus; they devote effort into their activities almost spontaneously. Because the need to regulate motivation consumes a form of mental energy, these individuals are less likely than are peers to feel a sense of exhaustion after they complete the tasks. Their persistence and determination remains.

Interestingly, however, their determination declines markedly if they receive choice, but then are encouraged by their Manager to pursue a particular activity, with statements such as, "It's up to you whether you write the report or analyse the data; I would encourage you to write the report though". Despite the choice they are granted, they feel a sense of obligation as well. Because they recognize that some choice is offered, they struggle to maintain their motivation to fulfil this obligation. This struggle consumes mental energy and undermines persistence.

## **Recommendation for Managers**

Many managers attempt to empower their employees while also imposing some control. They might include statements like, "I'd recommend you use this machine,

but it's up to you". When managers impose control, but grant choice, employees become less engaged and inspired.

Managers should instead offer genuine choice without any control or obligation, using statements like, "I'll leave the matter entirely up to you; do what you think is right".

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*Based in Melbourne, Australia, Christopher Shen Consulting brings organisational psychology solutions to workplaces, helping people become stronger leaders and teams become better performers. You can contact Christopher on [www.christophershen.com.au](http://www.christophershen.com.au)*

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