

CHAPTER 7

Where Burnout and Leadership Intersect

Implications From, and for, Academic Library (and Other Higher Education) Stakeholders

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ABSTRACT

As evidenced by both the Chronicle of Higher Education and Harvard Business Review issuing special reports on the topic in early 2021, burnout has become a hot-button issue in American workplaces. While burnout can manifest in individuals in numerous ways, it can also be catastrophic and expensive for organizations, including academic libraries, if it is left unaddressed



by leadership. As a result, this chapter looks at how leadership changes can create uncertainty that exacerbates employee burnout. We present three case studies from three different points of view to show how leadership can make a difference in librarian and library staff burnout. Ultimately, we argue that the renewed focus on burnout, performance measurement, and assessment presents university and academic library leaders with the opportunity to prevent their organizations from being consumed by burnout.

Introduction

As librarians, we value etymology, origins, and provenance, especially as we strategize approaches and implement solutions for the problems we encounter. Yet the concept of burnout begins with fire—the very destroyer of libraries for centuries. Now to protect collections and contents (and not the least important, our people), we use fire suppression systems that will cause minimal damage and safeguard all that we hold dear in our institutions. We avoid the use of accelerants and limit exposure to environmental conditions and hazards that could exacerbate risk for a catastrophic fire. Likewise, we need to employ preventative measures and buffers to mitigate burnout.

So, what exactly is burnout in this context? According to the World Health Organization's (WHO) 11th version of the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (2019):

It is characterized by three dimensions: 1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and 3) a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment. (para. 3)

Burnout manifests in numerous ways. It can be disastrous and costly for individuals and organizations—in this case libraries. Researchers have argued that one of the biggest drivers of burnout among academic librarians is the rapid change associated with library work (Wood et al., 2020). Because one of the biggest changes that can be introduced into a library is a change in leadership, this chapter will focus on how leadership transitions within both the library and the larger university are related to burnout. We present three anonymized case studies* that look at burnout from three different perspectives and discuss potential steps library leaders might consider to mitigate or effectively blunt burnout caused by similar leadership changes.

* Names and identifying details have been changed in the case studies, but the stories in this chapter are composite reflections of actual events and circumstances

Background

Combined, the authors represent more than six decades of experience in academic libraries. We arrived at the connection between leadership change and burnout through our shared roles as academic library advancement officers. This can be a challenging role where it is common to struggle to find potential donors, set attainable goals, and gain respect from administration as well as fellow fundraisers with large pools of alumni donors to solicit. It is not surprising that many colleagues and their leaders come and go in the academic library fundraising world (Rizkallah, 2020). In fact, it has become a ritual for new hires to start their positions by reading through reports of how their predecessors worked. These reports have just enough details that the reader knows who the players are, but they are often vague enough, for privacy reasons, that these people seem like ghosts. Their goals and motivations are unknown, but the fundraiser's sense of struggle is clearly palpable. Ultimately, we came to see academic library fundraising as a space landscaped with the embers of burnout.

Initially, we thought this correlation between burnout and leadership transitions was unique to fundraising and connected to the close partnership between an advancement officer and library dean or director, yet this trend seems to be pervasive across all roles in academic libraries and across higher education. Additionally, with public confidence in higher education at an all-time low (Marken, 2019), the sector experiencing record job losses during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kroger, 2021), and the ongoing exodus of long-term and career academic employees, it is not surprising that higher education is increasingly experiencing leadership changes. Whether at the presidential or provost level or in other vice-presidential positions from finance to advancement to research to information technology, these transitions have seemed more ubiquitous during the past decade or more. Our advancement experiences gave us pause and provided early warning signs clearly telling us to pay better attention to the pervasiveness of this phenomenon.

Like wildfire, the pace of change in higher education and within libraries can be a consuming force that contributes to the effects of burnout on employees and organizations. University leadership transitions at any level will impact libraries, and within top leadership levels, decisions made there may alter or transform academic libraries for generations to come. In some cases, libraries (through their leadership teams) must justify their existence and the importance of their roles within the institution with each new campus leader. You may enter a conversation with this new leader not knowing how they perceive the value of the library and its integral role within the institution. The position of the library as a recognized value partner on campus can vary tremendously. While some institutions work closely with the library, at others it is a forgotten piece of the institutional puzzle. This also yields role confusion or role conflict; role confusion or conflict coupled with leadership transitions can be destabilizing personally and organizationally, and destabilization is itself a potential cause for burnout among employees and organizational leaders.

We contend that leadership transitions (on campus or in the academic library), when combined with other factors, accelerate or exacerbate the burnout problem. The focus on

institutional performance goals and individual metrics have caused what Jennings (2021, p. 99) called “metric whiplash.” While originally postulated in an advancement context, metric whiplash refers to a situation in which goals are often on a pendulum and leadership changes tend to cause goals to vacillate radically from those presently in place. This goal switching, coupled with having to justify the individual’s worth as a team member, seem to be two significant factors for burnout across libraries and organizations.

Burnout: Problematic and Pervasive

Many people who are burned out may not realize it. They may say, “Oh, it is just some extra stress because of _____” or “This project is taking up all of my time” or “I don’t understand why I feel so ineffective/angry/irritated” or, in the case of fundraising, “I can’t connect with any of my donors, they won’t return my calls, yet because of my metrics I have to keep trying to connect with them.” As leaders and colleagues, we recognize that many different factors from the economy, to work–life balance, to caregiving are impacting friends, colleagues, family, ourselves, and key stakeholders (read: all humans). Therefore, most of us try to resolve our issues with more exercise, meditation, chocolate, prayer, stress-relieving practices, or any comfort food, ritual, or activity you might choose. (Caldbeck, 2021; Luciano & Brett, 2021). Many learn to just endure the stress and keep moving forward: knowing you are not doing your best work, but powering through nonetheless. There is a bit of a power/shame continuum: if you start to rely on others, you may come across as weak. Further, it is also difficult to separate out the stress you acquire at (or from) work from the stress experienced in your personal life. When you consider a wildfire, it is not left unchecked or unmanaged because of the destruction it will cause. As the following case studies illustrate, burnout is similar in that if we leave it unacknowledged and fail to respond to the signs in ourselves and our colleagues, it is likely only to get worse (Luciano & Brett, 2021).

Burning the Candle at Both Ends

Meet Morgan, a middle manager at an academic library in the Midwestern United States. Morgan is relatively new to their library, having moved two years ago from an entry-level librarian position on the East Coast. Morgan is what you might call a rock star employee—they run their department smoothly, they publish regularly, and they willingly take up new projects and programs. Morgan also has a lot going on personally, as they are the sole caregiver for two aging parents who live an hour away from campus. Morgan’s boss, the director of the library, raves about the work that Morgan does, but is also concerned that they will burn out and has mentioned this to them many times. Morgan has always dismissed burnout, though—it referred to others with more challenging circumstances. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Morgan began to struggle, but could still make everything work thanks to their understanding supervisor. Then in the middle of the pandemic,

their supportive boss decided to retire, leaving a lot of uncertainty about the direction of the library and what Morgan's place would be in it going forward.

One day, Morgan's coworker sent a burnout quiz to the library staff e-mail distribution list, and Morgan decided to take it just for fun. They got a perfect score, meaning they had the highest possible level of burnout. When we asked Morgan about that quiz, they said:

Everyone's always been telling me that I'm burned out and I guess they were all right. Because we are in transition, I do not have a boss I can talk to about it. I still have a ton of work to do, but I feel overwhelmed because I have no direction yet. I want to impress my new boss, but I'm not sure how yet so I have to keep on working hard to prove myself. Basically, I'm too busy to be burnt out so I will just keep working on something because I have to. What other choice do I have?

Elements of Morgan's story may sound familiar—and may have attributes you recognize personally or in your coworkers, managers, or subordinates. According to a 2018 survey about professional burnout, many academic librarians are exhibiting symptoms of workplace distress, including exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Livens, 2021; Wood et al., 2020). Increasing work demands coupled with personal challenges, such as having extensive caregiving responsibilities, can easily serve as kindling for burnout. In Morgan's case, burnout was a problem before the pandemic, and they were containing it until their supportive supervisor left. Before the leadership transition, Morgan had not experienced metric whiplash or role confusion or conflict. They knew their goals (metrics), their place in the organization, and they were attempting to balance it all with their personal and other professional commitments and priorities. They had built a solid and significant working relationship with their library leader, a relationship that included trust, mutual respect, and the ability to grow. Leadership change was the only new variable: the established leader planning to leave and subsequently leaving the organization, and the search for and subsequent hiring of a new library head. This could be viewed as an accelerant for Morgan's burnout.

We recognize that other personal factors such as caregiving—whether for aging relations, children, or others—matter greatly on the work–life continuum, yet we are focusing upon occupational issues with respect to how burnout presents (as explained by the WHO guidelines). Also, Morgan's relationship with their supervisor is a significant one with potential to influence both their present work situation and future work prospects. This may be a way that we the authors choose to expand upon the WHO definition. The impending leadership change can (and we postulate, does) accelerate burnout among highly productive middle managers: key employees who in many cases report directly to the leader transitioning out of the organization. A leadership change is unsettling and yields questioning of role, placement in the organization, and potential for further growth and development, as well as interpersonal communication and changing organizational dynamics.

Fair to Middlin': Middle Management

When many people think of organizational change, they often think of the positive outcomes that result from these changes. In academic libraries, these would include practical things like replacing outdated processes with more effective ones and strategic shifts such as a refocus of the organization's mission and vision to better align with larger institutional priorities. Not all outcomes of organizational change are positive, however. According to a 2017 Center for Organizational Excellence study, 50% of workers had experienced some form of organizational change in the last year, and those who did were more likely to say that they were chronically stressed, felt cynical about their work environment, and were more likely to quit than those who did not experience change. One of the biggest changes an organization can undergo is a change in leadership. Whether it is a new library dean, library director, university provost, university president, or university chancellor, it can cause tremendous stress for library staff. This is especially the case if these changes happen frequently.

When Burnout Spreads Down the Chain of Command

Meet Sam, the head of special collections at their university library. Sam has worked at the same midsize private university for the last 30 years. They started as a student, then worked as staff, then got an MLS with an archives concentration and were promoted to archivist. Now Sam was recently named head of the special collections department. During the first 20 years of Sam's tenure, they served under one president, two provosts, and one library director, but as the economy and perceptions of higher education shifted during the last 10 years, Sam's university has had three presidents, four provosts, and one library director. All of this change has led to a lot of uncertainty for Sam:

I was hired under a university administration that saw Special Collections as an asset and wanted to promote it. I worked hard to build lots of connections between my department and the rest of the university. When that president left, I had no idea who they would hire next. The campus didn't even know who the candidates were. There was not a lot of transparency in the process.

Then when the new president started, Sam felt a different kind of uncertainty:

The new president's focus was very different, and he didn't understand us or what we did. All of that hard work I did suddenly didn't seem to matter with this new administration and I had to start all

over again. I wasn't sure where I stood and worried that my position and my department might be eliminated if things got really bad.

Because Sam is a middle manager, they had to manage the stress not only for themselves, but also for their department's staff. "I was really stressed and started secretly looking for a new job," said Sam. "I tried not to take my stress out on my department, but I know I did. I was angry and disillusioned because it felt like a career that I had spent so long building suddenly didn't seem to matter." Ultimately Sam says that leadership changed again just three years later, and this second new administration is much more sympathetic. "There isn't quite a rush to try and change things right now and that's a good thing. I finally feel like I know where I stand and there is a plan for the university going forward."

The recent track record at Sam's university raises the question of how long this stability will last. And this is a different type of metric whiplash—one of overall institutional goals and shifting campus priorities—that can affect an academic unit, not simply an incumbent in a role, thereby making metric whiplash a structural problem, not simply a human one.

The Library Dean Transition: New Fires and Old Fires

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic raged with classes moved online and academic library buildings closed, leadership transitions continued to occur. Multiple library deans left their current institutions to retire or to laterally transition to head librarian roles at new institutions. Additionally, middle managers left to move into library dean roles. In many cases, these library leaders may have never entered their new library buildings (or physically relocated to their new regions or communities) until many months after being installed in their leadership roles. Plus, they may not have met with anyone in person for several months after they started. Most of these new leaders participated in virtual interview processes. Such hiring practices, begun during a pandemic, may continue well into the future, yet their impact on organizational dynamics is not yet known. Each of these candidates had reasons for leaving their previous institutions for new ones, including their personal career goals, typically considered a primary factor in leadership transitions (Heady et al., 2020).

Leaders Can Mitigate the Fire

Meet Kelly, for whom personal growth and career goals were two drivers in their pursuit of a new leadership position. From the time they applied for this new position until they started their new deanship, the process had taken almost a year. To provide some context, Kelly spent the majority of their career working at one academic library, albeit in many different roles. Their first professional position was a unit supervisor and, because of their performance over the years, they had been presented with several opportunities to

grow within the organization. Leadership in the library was relatively stable, with only two deans in more than three decades. However, there were frequent leadership changes at both the presidential, provostial, and other VP roles at their institution, more than a dozen at last count.

A necessary aside, and one that has been documented: the academic library position search process lends itself to increasing stress not only for the candidate, but also for the members of the search committee (and these search committee members often include employees of the library itself; Munde, 2008). Burnout for participants in a search or search committee can be exacerbated the longer a search process continues or especially when the search fails (Munde, 2008). Once a decision is made to hire, the process of departing one's current institution is understandably daunting as leadership works to reconfigure all the remaining work and assignments in progress. Kelly worked quickly to finish off outstanding projects, pack their office, pack their residence, and ensure everyone left behind at their current institution was sufficiently trained in how to do the multitude of remaining tasks.

Kelly was beyond thrilled and excited to take on a new leadership role in a very different part of the country. That has not changed since they started their job. It also does not mean there was not anxiety and some imposter syndrome along the way. While the hiring process took almost a year, Kelly had never set foot on the university campus until their first day at their new employer. For many, this scenario might yield a tremendous level of anxiety, fear, and potential dismay. Yet Kelly's primary concern was for the people they would be leading and how those individuals viewed Kelly's arrival. People, rather than physicality, influenced Kelly's transition playbook. Kelly found everyone they met with on their first day gracious and welcoming, even though it was daunting that they had never set foot on campus previously.

Kelly's leadership experience and education influenced their approach to joining a new library. Research consistently indicates that "lack of communication and support from their manager" is a major accelerant for burnout (Moss, 2019, p. 4). Because they were a new library leader, transparency and communication were essential for Kelly—and for those employees that they now oversee. Over the past few months, Kelly has been conducting orientation meetings at their new institution to learn about the existing relationships between university colleagues and the library. Additionally, it was important for Kelly to understand the morale of the current staff and faculty in the library and to make sure they were communicating clearly, asking questions, and listening carefully.

In Kelly's specific leadership transition, they were joining an organization as the senior leader after a retirement and a subsequent interim director appointment. Their experience is not that unusual in academic libraries (retirement, interim, new library head). Yet they, like others who made leadership changes during the pandemic, were facing uncertainties in an organization where a significant majority of faculty and staff were still working remotely. Kelly hoped that they had shared enough of their communication and leadership style during the interview for people to feel comfortable meeting with them. It was important for them to be authentic throughout the process—quirks and all. Over the course of their conversations and meetings, Kelly was given the chance to alleviate

the stress and, hopefully, the potential for burnout for numerous faculty and staff. It was a process that focused on reassuring staff and faculty, as well as communicating how Kelly's approaches potentially differed from previous leadership and what staff and faculty might expect from Kelly. This is an intentional process of building trust with those they are supervising. Ideally, Kelly is reducing burnout triggers and stress for individuals across the organization with purpose and communication while dousing any potential hot spots for burnout.

Discussion: What We Learned From Watching the Fire

All three case studies illustrate the critical power dynamic between leaders and those that follow them. We contend that leadership transitions, coupled with the existing power dynamic presented by current library leadership, may exacerbate or accelerate burnout on the part of subordinates. The leadership transition itself is the spark, the match, the trigger for the burnout of those below in the organizational hierarchy. We postulate that transition from long-serving stable leader to more rapid turnover and leadership transition may be an additional accelerant or exacerbating factor in burnout. Simply stated, when the organization is destabilized, it may also destabilize an employee who had a clearly defined (and vested) role in making the previous iteration of the organizational culture run.

Hollander and Offermann (1990) studied follower involvement and empowerment in the relationship construct; Avelino and Rotmans (2009) created an interdisciplinary framework to study power with respect to organizational structural change. Moropa (2010) addressed the need to apply business leadership principles within academic libraries. Each of these papers (and those that cite them) provide context and framing for how power and leadership transitions can influence burnout.

Reflecting on our example cases, the connection between burnout and library leadership in transition is omnipresent. Morgan's story demonstrates how a leadership change can turn smoldering burnout into a full-fledged conflagration. Leaders who demonstrate concern for their employees' well-being can hold burnout at bay. The departure of those caring leaders creates change and uncertainty, which are key precursors to employee burnout. Morgan is clearly burnt out, but with no concerned leadership in sight, they are likely to continue to struggle.

In the case of Sam, the middle manager, they benefited from a leadership transition that created a new power relationship that was ultimately advantageous to the library. This could change yet again if the chief librarian, the president, or the provost position changes once more. Not only was the library director or dean affected by the leadership transition, but everyone down throughout the layers of the organization was as well to varying degrees.

Understanding how institutional leadership influences the burnout levels of the organization is fundamental. In the new dean case, the power dynamic has shifted a third time; Kelly is working to understand the extent of burnout that exists within their new library

organization. Upper leadership is presently stable with no planned changes on the horizon, but change is something to prepare for down the road (as leadership changes appear to be the current norm in the higher education life cycle). If Kelly had come in and used the power of their position to challenge the existing culture and implement changes at a pace that is not welcomed, undoubtedly the organization could be negatively impacted by metric whiplash and by potential faculty and staff departures (or by an early exit by Kelly as the dean).

So how do we avoid metric whiplash as leaders? Carefully, and by taking the proverbial temperature of the organization, its key players, and the organizational culture. Avoiding metric whiplash is deceptively simple in principle: analyzing assessment methods, open communication, employee buy-in, achievable goals, repeat; yet in practice, it may prove quite challenging. Why? Because time is finite, outcomes rule organizations, and individual employees (including new leaders) have goals and benchmarks that they are expected to achieve.

The authors recognize that ostensibly every new leader wishes to have their own initiatives, signature projects, and key priorities. Yet when they come into an existing organization, there are already goals, objectives, and metrics that each individual and the overall organization are being measured against. To change these unceremoniously, without individual and institutional buy-in, can be unsettling personally and organizationally. Just because it worked at the new leader's former organization or institution does not necessarily mean it will work at their new location. Metric whiplash can cause rapid fire turnover for existing employees, too, as they may burn out trying to justify existing strategic plans, individual goals, or why the institution chose to no longer assess or count XYZ. These employees may also quickly look for the fire exits—unwilling to watch their organization burn or walk on hot coals themselves.

As Jennings (2021) postulated, it is vital for new library leaders to understand and play a part in crafting the metrics that university administration establishes for them individually and for their organization:

This concept is important for you to grasp as a library leader. You need to understand how these success measures are determined—and need to understand how they may influence workflow and your operations. These success measures should be agreed upon—and negotiated with you; it is imperative for the long-term growth and advancement of your library that you be an integral part of their development and implementation. (p. 99)

Likewise, this matters for those you supervise within your academic library: establishing collective goals are critical for success.

Acknowledging that metric whiplash exists is a great initial step. The frequency of goal switching and the inexplicable return to previously used assessment methods—often in the middle of an academic year or project timeline—appear to be hallmarks for metric whiplash. This is significant to note because these same metrics are often used as evaluative tools for employee performance appraisals.

To avoid metric whiplash and exacerbating or accelerating burnout among your employees, communicate clearly, do not change goals (especially performance metrics) in the middle of a cycle, do not add new goals just because a peer institution did, have and follow a dynamic, multiyear strategic plan, educate and involve others in goal setting and assessment, and most importantly, work to achieve buy-in from key stakeholders. Most people thrive knowing that they have a modicum of control and can choose their own adventure—or at least customize that adventure.

Possible Ways to Mitigate Burnout Through Proactive Leadership

It is important to note that library employee burnout is not a hopeless cause. “Organizations have a chance, right now, to fix this type of thing. Burnout is preventable” (Moss, 2019, p. 6). Like wildfires, burnout can be extinguished through effective leadership strategies. Kelly strives to integrate empathy into their communication and management approaches and works to find creative ways to help employees adjust to different workload demands and project timelines. In libraries we are faced with constant change. One strategy as a library leader might be to revisit the urgency of various projects or create more flexibility in the schedule. Understand how your own stress might be affecting your leadership approaches.

If you are struggling with new university leadership, consider the following questions:

- As a new administrator, are you creating upheaval in the organization by implementing too many changes too quickly?
- Were you asked to implement goals, metrics, or priorities that were not mutually agreed upon between you and university leadership?
- Is your stress influencing the pressure you might be placing on your staff and faculty? Is this stress self-imposed by your desire to excel or achieve?
- Are you creating metric whiplash when your employee has shared that they haven’t been able to complete newly established (or recently revised) goals in a stated time frame? Had you involved that employee in the creation or revision of those goals?

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic (2019) stated, “If organizations want to improve their employees’ work experience, they should start by improving their leadership. This will probably do more to reduce workplace stress than any other single measure” (p. 3). Throughout this chapter, we have discussed how leadership and specifically leadership transitions influence and accelerate burnout. A critical construct for future exploration: how to counteract this trend. Further, we recommend exploring how once-stable organizations that have recently experienced rapid leadership transitions have managed employee burnout. Additionally, is there institutional support for new leaders (and existing leaders) to recognize burnout in themselves? In their employees? In their organizations? What tools and resources are provided? We also recommend a study of burnout among

middle managers at libraries specifically asking about leadership transitions. Lastly, we recommend that this research not be limited to simply librarians but take in all in library management—regardless of status. For example, engaging all direct reports of the chief librarian in a transition study may be advisable.

Conclusion

“We didn’t start the fire. No, we didn’t light it, but we tried to fight it” (Joel, 1989) repeats as the chart-topping song concludes. Likewise, throughout this chapter, we have spoken about how as library leaders we need to find ways to limit burnout as it is having outsized effects on library professionals and organizations. We theorized that leadership changes may accelerate or exacerbate burnout within organizations as well as providing areas for additional research and investigation. The literature shows that burnout has numerous internal as well as external causes and effects on organizations and individuals. Each of the authors could share their own stories, both personal and organizational, about the intersection of burnout and leadership, yet our goal for this work was simple: to outline a potential new avenue of exploration for both leadership and organizational behavior scholarship within the framework of academic libraries.

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