

Burnout in the Nonprofit Sector

Moving Beyond Self-Care to Organizational Solutions

Burnout is not simply an employee well-being issue. It is also an organizational effectiveness issue shaped by how work is designed, managed, resourced, and supported. Preventing burnout requires looking beyond individual resilience and examining the organizational conditions that contribute to chronic workplace stress.

The Nonprofit Reality

Nonprofit work is often shaped by deep commitment to mission, limited resources, and growing community needs. Staff are frequently asked to adapt quickly, absorb additional responsibilities, and do more with less. These realities are familiar across the sector, but over time, they can make burnout harder to recognize and easier to normalize.

What Is Burnout?

The World Health Organization defines burnout as an **occupational phenomenon** resulting from **chronic workplace stress** that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism or psychological distance from work, and reduced professional effectiveness. Importantly, burnout is understood as a workplace phenomenon rather than a medical condition. Because burnout develops in response to workplace conditions, organizations play a critical role in both its prevention and reduction.

Why Burnout Persists in Nonprofits

Research consistently identifies excessive workload, role ambiguity, limited autonomy, emotional labor, inadequate supervision, and lack of organizational support as contributors to burnout. These risk factors often show up in nonprofits through lean staffing models and combined roles.

In many nonprofits, employees wear multiple hats, responsibilities expand over time, or several functions are combined into a single role. These arrangements are often born out of necessity as organizations respond to changing priorities and limited resources. Over time, however, they can contribute to competing priorities, role ambiguity, decision fatigue, and burnout.

The Impact is clear. According to nonprofit leaders surveyed by the Center for Effective Philanthropy:

95% concerned about staff burnout	1/3 said burnout was very much a concern	1/2 more concerned about their own burnout	76% said burnout affects mission achievement
--	---	---	---

Source: Center for Effective Philanthropy, *State of Nonprofits Report (2024)*.

The Organizational Cost

Burnout contributes to turnover, absenteeism, reduced productivity, decision fatigue, and the loss of institutional knowledge. For organizations operating with limited resources, these costs directly affect service quality, leadership capacity, and mission delivery. **If the same patterns continue to emerge across employees, departments, and years, leaders should ask not "What is wrong with our people?" but "What is it about our systems that keeps producing this outcome?"**

Leadership Toolkit: Evidence-Based Strategies for Reducing Burnout Risk

Recognizing Burnout Early

Burnout can be easy to miss because employees often continue showing up while feeling depleted or disengaged. Managers should watch for changes in behavior, energy, and work patterns over time.

Common signs include:

- Persistent exhaustion or fatigue, irritability, or emotional withdrawal
- Physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, fatigue), reduced motivation or engagement
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions, increased absenteeism or presenteeism

These signs do not necessarily indicate burnout, but they should prompt a supportive conversation about workload, priorities, role clarity, and available support.

Organizational Strategies

Strategy	Practical Tool	Leadership Question
Redesign work	Work redesign sessions (using Stop, Start, Continue)	What have we continued doing simply because we've always done it? Have we expanded responsibilities without adjusting workload, staffing, or priorities?
Clarify priorities	Annual work planning; Quarterly priority review (using an Impact vs. Effort Matrix)	If everything is a priority, is anything truly a priority? What can we pause, delay, or deprioritize?
Clarify roles & decisions	Role clarification workshops (using RACI or MOCHA)	Does everyone know who owns the work and who makes the final decision?
Strengthen managers	Regular one-on-ones, development conversations, and workload check-ins	How often are managers discussing workload, not just performance?
Increase capacity strategically	Role & Workload Analysis (task inventory by responsibility, frequency, and time allocation)	Where are staff consistently working beyond capacity or outside their expertise?
Reduce administrative burden	Review administrative processes to identify opportunities to simplify workflows, reduce duplication, and better leverage technology.	What administrative processes could be simplified or better supported by technology?
Assess burnout	Validated burnout assessments (e.g., Maslach Burnout Inventory), supplemented by pulse surveys, stay interviews, turnover, and absenteeism data	Are we using validated measures to understand burnout, or only reacting after employees leave?
Support individual well-being	EAP/mental health resources, boundary-setting training, and early support conversations	Do employees know what support is available, and do they feel safe using it?

References

World Health Organization; Center for Effective Philanthropy, State of Nonprofits 2024; Edú-Valsania, Laguía, & Moriano (2022); Maslach & Leiter; Candid; Lyra Health, A Manager's Guide to Preventing Employee Burnout.

About the author

Neema Mbonela is an organizational consultant specializing in human resources, organizational development, and leadership for mission-driven organizations. Through Utu Advisory, she partners with nonprofit leaders to strengthen organizational effectiveness and navigate complex people challenges. Her approach combines research, organizational psychology, and practical experience to help leaders make thoughtful decisions, strengthen organizational effectiveness, and develop sustainable people practices.

Contact Information

Neema Mbonela
Organizational Consultant
Utu Advisory
www.utuadvisory.com
nmbonela@utuadvisory.com
[LinkedIn](#)