

Good morning, everybody. Dennis Engelbrecht, Digging Deeper.

I wrote about this a few weeks back in our Four Things newsletter. So, some of you may have seen this before, but I wanted to talk today about stress and burnout. And today's construction just has never been more difficult, more stressful than it is today. The people shortages, the supply constraints and shortages, the amazing price rises we're facing today. All are creating a job that is just much more chaotic, much more difficult. It's probably likely that for any project manager in particular out there, that their capacity may be 20% less than it was 2 years ago because the job has simply become that much more difficult. But my guess is you haven't added the people and therefore they're taking on this extra 20% burden. So, what we're seeing is we're seeing more stress and more burnout out there.

And stress and burnout are probably things that you've seen through the course of your career. And I think, if people think back, it's probably been more prevalent when you've had bad jobs, all of a sudden, the burden of that bad job and the difficulty of trying to recover really stresses and burns out those teams. In a lot of cases, we lose those teams from our company, that sort of the wake of the damage that remains after some of those bad jobs. And in some cases, those folks are never the same again, they're never as capable, confident as they were before they went through that difficult, bad job. So again, as leaders and managers, the cause is out there, the stress and the burnout is definitely taking place.

To understand this better, I've used in the past the analogy of a freeway or superhighway. If you think about efficiency on a road, a superhighway or a freeway, basically the more cars you can get on there still going at their top speed, you keep gaining in overall efficiency of the road. You're getting more miles driven further by more cars. And the more cars you can shove onto that highway and are continuing to go the same speed, you're reaching peak efficiency at some point. Then you add one more car or two more cars or a bunch more cars. And what happens? All of a sudden, everything slows down, and you put one more car on there. And all of a sudden everything stops. You go from peak efficiency to zero efficiency. And I think this is what happens basically to a lot of folks, the same thing, you pile the work on them, they're moving at peak efficiency. And finally, they get too much, where they lose the ability to prioritize, to organize, to get things done. Then they get stressed and then things get worse.

Well, the interesting part of this now is there's a lot of recent science about stress and burnout, and the science is quite important to understand. The science shows that when people start to hit that point of stress or burnout, the body, as it does for a lot of situations, puts out various chemicals. And those chemicals actually affect the areas of the brain that support judgment, organization, prioritization, fight or flight, instincts. All of those things, that if your workload is increased, you need more to be able to fight your way through it. At the same time, those things are being diminished by chemicals, which you have no control over. So, as you look at your stressed and burned out folks or folks that might be on that road, you might look at them a little differently now because it's easy to blame or cast fault, or just say, "Get yourself out of it. Use the power of positive thinking to get through it."

But if this is a chemical reaction and it's something that's not really in their control, it's likely to cycle toward the worse with that kind of pressure as well. So, it may require some different actions on your part.

So, this is what's happening out there. Now, what do you as a leader do about it? Well, the first thing I think each of you need is you need to have your antenna up. You need to have a recognition plan. You need to have your eyes out looking for those signs of stress and burnout before they get so bad that they actually do become a self-fulfilling prophecy with the brain affecting the ability for them to handle it in a negative manner. So, make sure you're staying attuned with your people. And remember not everybody has the same capacity. So, you have to be looking at them as individuals, you can say, well, everybody can handle \$10 million a year in project management. That's been our standard forever. Well, remember if that was the standard, it's probably 20% less today. But in any case, everybody's standard and capabilities is a little different.

So have a recognition plan, be out there looking for the signs. Are you seeing some folks not getting the day-to-day things done that they used to? Are you seeing them not returning phone calls because of stress and not wanting to jump into it? Things like that you can pick up where people are starting to get into that. With your antenna, of course, prevention. If you understand some folks don't have the capacity or some folks are hitting that, then you've got to come up with a prevention plan. That may be adding more people so that everybody isn't stressed, that you can spread that stress out. It may be getting those folks more help. It may be the leaders of the company jumping in and taking some things off their plate so that they can now function more normally. And of course, it's better if you can do that before you overwhelm them than after you overwhelm them.

Next is the support plan. Once you see folks and you see them in this deteriorating or degrading situation, how do you support them? How can you take things off their plate? How can you get them the help they need? What conversations do you need to have, both to help them understand what they're in and to help you understand how they can be best helped? One of the great things that a lot of leaders do is they spend maybe a half an hour or an hour a week, with each key employees, helping them prioritize, understanding what's on their to-do list, understanding what's on their priority list and making sure that they have a good plan to handle that.

If you're spending that half an hour, or an hour, you'll probably recognize if things from the prior week aren't getting checked off of that list. And that also will give you an idea of who can maybe help them when you understand what's on their list, what are the things that they have to accomplish? And perhaps you can get them the help they need, or you can offload the things that are causing them the most stress and take them on, hopefully for yourself or someone who's not under as much stress.

And then finally, when you do have an employee that, let's just say, loses it and they get to that point. And again, this is a chemical thing, and you should be trying to avoid judgment, that can handle it. And now, they maybe need to actually completely separate, get some time off, get some mental healthcare, which of course, you can't get into too personally because of HIPPA and all these other things. But you certainly can support them with the time off. And you can maybe come up with a back to work plan, maybe get them started on some small projects to get them reengaged in some way, the kind of help folks need once they're burned out so that you don't lose them for a lifetime. And again, going back, a lot of times we associate that with bad jobs where we lose them for a lifetime. But now we're really facing so much stress in this industry that we have the possibility of just burning out a lot of good people.

And of course, for our own company capabilities, we want to avoid that. But certainly, in the human aspect, we want to avoid that. So, recognition, prevention, support, and recovery. As a leader, all four of those things should be on your radar as jobs you have, both looking for the stress and burnout, trying to prevent it, and trying to help your employees fight through it and recover. Again, Dennis Engelbrecht, Digging Deeper.