



8 Signs That You Could Be (Accidentally) Overworking Your Team

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You're a new manager and you want to do well in your new job. In your quest to prove that you can handle people management responsibilities (and achieve your department's objectives), could you be accidentally overworking your team? Here are eight signs to look for:

Employee attitude changes. Do you notice any employees who were previously positive and happy who are now showing signs of negative attitudes or general "crankiness" while at work? Has there been any irritability or angry outbursts among your team members? It might be due to stress from being over-worked.

Employees who avoid you. Some people are conflict averse and don't like to tell their manager that they are too busy to take on any additional projects or tasks. These employees may try to avoid you, thinking that if you don't see them much, then you won't give them any more assignments. Take heed if you see employees running away when you come near or generally trying to avoid you.

Employees with higher than normal hours worked per week. In many companies, it's pretty typical for salaried employees to work more than 40 hours a week, often up to about 50 hours. A Stanford study by John Pencavel has shown that employee productivity reaches a maximum at about 49 hours worked, and then drops off significantly. How many hours do your employees each work? If it's more than 50 hours per week, this could be a sign of over-work. Long hours at the office could lead to job burnout, so take a look at the average work week hours of your team.

Decreasing employee engagement scores. This can also be a warning sign that employees are over-worked. Analyze the results and get to the bottom of any poor or decreasing employee engagement scores.

Increasing employee absenteeism. Overworked employees may request higher than normal numbers of sick days, because long hours of work can cause health issues, according to the CDC

Employees who don't take all their vacation days. When they are over-burdened with work, some employees will skip taking some (or even all) of their vacation days. Request a report from your HR department, so you can analyze if this is happening with any of your employees.

Employees who tell you they can't take on more work. When you try to assign more work, employees who aren't conflict averse may push back and tell you that they can't take on any more assignments. Some may do so in a calm manner, while others might have an angry tone in their voice.

Increasing employee turnover. In my coaching practice, I've noticed that clients who over-work employees almost always have higher than normal employee turnover in their department. Which makes sense; burned out employees are usually not happy employees, so they seek out other jobs.

If you've looked around your department and seen signs that you might be over-working your staff, here are some actions you can take:

Ensure all employees have a Goals and Objectives document. This makes it easier to have discussions with employees whenever new projects or actions arise, so you can mutually determine if project priorities need to be shuffled or due dates moved out to rebalance employee workloads.

Encourage employees to work reasonable hours per week. 40-50 hours worked each week is reasonable. 60+ hours per week is not reasonable. 60 hours worked equates to working Monday through Saturday for 10 hours each day. A 70-hour workweek equates to working all seven days for 10 hours each day. Think about that. Common sense should tell you that isn't healthy. Well-rested employees will be happier and more productive employees.

Be a role model when it comes to "unplugging" from work. Avoid sending emails or texts into the wee hours of the night. Demonstrate that you truly believe in the importance of all employees (including yourself) living a life that allows for time for work, time for sleep and time for activities outside of work hours (while completely "unplugged" from the office). Everyone needs time to relax and recharge, and that means time away from all electronic gadgets.

Encourage employees to take their vacation days. And don't forget to use your own vacation days, too. Train others in your department to be your back-up and prepare for succession transitions (for when you get your next promotion). Each time you're out of the office, put someone else in charge of your job responsibilities so others can develop their skills.

Allow employees to determine their work schedules (with your approval). Providing flexibility in work hours can go a long way to reducing employee stress. Some people may be early birds and others night owls; allowing employees some leeway with their hours in the office can be a simple way to create a happier and more productive work culture.

Practice ROWE. This stands for a Results-Only Work Environment. This concept, created by Cali Ressler and Jody Thompson, seeks to demolish the decades-old business concept that equates physically being at work with productivity, to promote a workplace that is based on results. States Ressler and Thompson, "It's a management strategy where employees are evaluated on performance, not presence."

Bottom line: As a people manager, it's important to walk a fine line between providing enough work (and the right kind of work) for your employees to feel challenged and excited and from over-loading employees with too much work. The right amount of tension with job assignments can create a culture of happy and motivated employees who are willing to "go the extra mile" when needed. Just be on the lookout for signs that your team or someone on your team has gone past that point and is feeling overwhelmed, because not everyone feels comfortable telling their manager when this happens. Sometimes it's up to the manager to see this happening and make adjustments to their workload or to take other actions to alleviate the issue.

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