Tips for Managing Engagement and Burnout

This tip sheet helps employees, managers, leaders and HR professionals at Harvard manage their own engagement levels during stressful times. It will offer tips for being more aware of factors that help or hinder one’s own engagement. Then offer tips for managing those factors that are within one’s control. It also offers tips for preventing one of the extremes of disengagement; burnout. Following each section are some tips specifically for managers.

Re-negotiate expectations. It’s not realistic that you would perform at the same levels of engagement and productivity that you did before these times. Become as clear as possible about what is expected from you at work and at home, during this time.
Focus on what is critical: Now is not the time to invest time in busy work. It may be tempting to take on less important projects to appear busy while working from home. Identify priorities at work and at home. What are the most important work projects for you to concentrate on?
Review with work stakeholders: Review these priorities and progress with your manager to ensure alignment around and decide how you will keep them updated on your progress.
Inch stones not milestones: Break down tasks related to the important projects into smaller chunks. Once you have identified what is important, identify sub-goals or sub-tasks of a larger goal to keep the work manageable and make progress clear. Shorten the timeframe of accountability for task by mapping what you will focus on a day or a week at a time. Decide how frequently you will communicate about progress as well as when and how you will ask for help.
Check in at home: It can be tempting to be drawn into small home projects while working at home. Consider what you need to focus on the most at home. Make sure those at home know what you will make time for and when. If responsibilities need to shift, make sure all at home know why and when this will happen.

For managers: Make sure that communications with staff about expectations are focused, specific, and designed to ensure mutual understanding and accountability. Clarify deadlines and let staff know what you think the deliverable will look like, so both understand what it means for a project to be completed. Staff should feel trusted to complete their projects and not feel pressured to appear busy.

Re-visit boundaries: Boundaries between work and life have never been less clear. Work-life conflict quickly leads to overwhelm, while good boundaries lead to wellness and synergy. Setting time, space and cognitive boundaries can help you facilitate the healthy interaction of the various parts of your life.
Become aware of the boundaries you have set in the past. Which have you set for yourself and which have you communicated to others? How often do you find you have ignored established boundaries? When are you able to maintain focus and boundaries? Once you are aware of how permeable your boundaries are, you can make sure to reinforce the ones you have already established as well and set new ones.

Assumptions about boundaries: If upon reflection you find you violate your boundaries often, consider what beliefs you have about setting boundaries? Can you challenge those beliefs and reframe them? Set time boundaries. You may want to use time blocking to set aside time for focused work at your most productive time of day. You can block your time to help eat lunch with your family. Modify as needed. When considering new boundaries think of them as experiments, not long-term rules. Test a new boundary to see how effective it may be for you. If you find you need to adjust to fit changing work or life priorities, do so as needed. Maintain boundaries. After setting up the new boundary and length of time you will want to test it. Communicate it clearly to those who may be impacted at work or at home. When distractions or competing commitments arise, do your best not to violate the new boundary during the testing period. Monitor your overall wellbeing. Check in with yourself regularly to see how well you are managing work and life. When you find yourself feeling overly distracted or torn, consider what new boundaries may be helpful.

For managers: Model boundary setting for your employees. If you need to work at night in order to accommodate personal commitments, let your staff know that your schedule reflects personal commitments. Your staff should feel empowered to be flexible with their time if they are completing the work, rather than feeling pressure to work at the same time as their manager.

Re-allocate energy. In addition to managing expectations and boundaries, it’s important to be aware of and protect your energy during these in stressful times. Build rituals into your day that re-charge your energy. Think of rituals that help you re-energize physically, emotionally, mentally. Build them into your schedule. Consider using transitions to help you switch between work mode and home mode. Think about ways to make the separation. Simulate a commute by going for a walk or taking a bike ride before starting your workday. Create connection. Isolation can be draining. Find informal ways to engage with your colleagues and friends. You may prefer to connect with one on one or as a group.
Be open. Authentic conversations also can help build connection with colleagues. It’s easy to misunderstand online communications, this may lead to confusion or even anxiety. Sharing more of yourself with your colleagues can help mitigate stress and help you feel supported and connected.

For managers: Rather than setting aside large chunks of time to interact, set aside moments, literally minutes, at the beginning of a meeting. Look for opportunities to make a brief, but meaningful connections with team members throughout the day, and as part of your work process. The ideas can be creative, silly, serious, and even related to your work.

Suggested Resources:

* Flex styles assessment* (tool for assessing how well you set boundaries around work and home)
* This Pandemic has Exposed the Missing Piece in Employee Engagement* (Forbes article)
* The Making of a Corporate Athlete* (HBR article related to rituals)

For managers:  *Engaging Employees During the Coronavirus Pandemic*