

NEOGOV

9 Best Practices for Combating —

LOW MORALE & BURNOUT

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HOW DID WE GET HERE?

BURNOUT AND LOW MORALE HAVE LONG BEEN PERVASIVE WORKPLACE ISSUES.

Although COVID-19 is no longer a crisis, pandemic-related stressors are still present in the workplace, causing low morale and burnout rates to skyrocket across industries. The public sector is no exception.

Beyond COVID-related challenges, other factors such as labor shortages, increased workloads, compensation issues, inflation concerns, increased turnover, and lack of recognition are contributing to more employees feeling disengaged and burned out. Burnout is becoming so prevalent, it's the top reason why employees leave organizations.

HR experts are sounding the alarm on the devastating impacts burnout and low morale are having on the health of both individuals and organizations. If employers do not intervene to correct systemic imbalances contributing to burnout, they can expect deep cultural, operational and financial issues to develop within the organization.

In this report, we delve into the specific reasons why burnout and low morale are more prevalent in the government, public safety, and education sectors. You'll learn more about the important role of morale in an organization, and several strategies to help address burnout and combat low morale within your organization.

BURNOUT VS. LOW MORALE

Before diving into solutions, it's helpful to understand what burnout is – and isn't, and how individual feelings of burnout contribute to low morale within an organization. **According to the World Health Organization, burnout is an occupational phenomenon caused by chronic, unmanaged workplace stress.**

People who burnout experience intense fatigue, often to the point of exhaustion. They are often less productive and more cynical about their jobs.

While the factors leading to burnout are unique to an individual, generally speaking, burnout is driven by a chronic imbalance between the demands or requirements of a job and the resources available to fulfill these requirements. For example, if job requirements or demands increase due to higher workloads or poor working conditions, yet resources to support these demands decrease, burnout is likely to develop.

And contrary to popular belief, this imbalance cannot be corrected by work breaks, weekends, or an occasional vacation. The likelihood of burnout re-emerging after a break is high since the root cause of burnout still exists.

A recent global workforce survey identified toxic workplace behavior as the number one predictor of burnout. **In fact, people who work in toxic environments are eight times more likely to experience burnout.** Toxic workplace behaviors can present as unethical, cutthroat, sabotaging, or abusive – all of which leave employees feeling devalued, diminished, and even unsafe.

Other systemic factors that contribute to burnout include unsustainable workloads, often attributed to high turnover and short staffing. Another often overlooked factor, which emerged alongside remote work, is **collaboration overload**, which is spending more time in meetings than conducting meaningful work. This contributes to employees feeling rushed or behind.

If the systemic imbalances causing burnout are not addressed, the cost to the organization comes in the form of low morale. When an employee is operating from a state of burnout, they're more critical of the organization, disengaged from its mission, and likely to have one foot out the door. When a majority of an organization is burned out, morale is quick to decline.



BURNOUT IS AN
OCCUPATIONAL
PHENOMENON
CAUSED BY **CHRONIC,**
UNMANAGED
WORKPLACE STRESS

LOW MORALE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Instances of burnout and low morale are increasing in the public sector. Various political, economic, environmental, and health related events over the past few years exacerbated the inherent challenges of public service. And in just one year the number of **public sector job openings rose by 45%, attributed in large part to voluntary turnover.**

While retirement and higher paying job opportunities topped the list of reasons why people are choosing to leave public sector employment, 32% of respondents point to **poor management**. The same NEOGOV survey shows **limited development opportunities, lack of work flexibility, and poor agency culture** as additional reasons for high public sector turnover.

These reasons share a common denominator — they're also factors that contribute to employee burnout and low morale. Let's delve deeper into how we got here for each public sector: government, public safety, and education.



Government

It's typical for government agencies to operate conservatively as good stewards of taxpayer dollars. For many agencies, budgets are tight under normal circumstances. But due to unprecedented challenges brought on by the pandemic, civil unrest, labor shortages, economic uncertainty, and other recent events, many **government offices are operating from a place of resource scarcity.**

High turnover and staff shortages are creating extra work for employees, which can quickly tip the balance and cause burnout. Perpetuating this negative cycle are challenges with recruitment. While the number of open positions have increased, the number of qualified candidates applying to these positions have plummeted. In fact, **nearly 80% of agencies surveyed by NEOGOV say they can't find qualified candidates.**

Other factors contributing to higher rates of burnout and low morale in government are **higher rates of politicization and criticism by the public**. Without a sense of support from the people you serve, it's easy to start feeling cynical. Experts note that cynicism can cause people to rethink their value and contributions at work, and is a hallmark sign of burnout.

Public Safety

Public safety agencies are seeing some of the highest levels of burnout, turnover, and low morale in the public sector. Law enforcement officers, EMS workers, and emergency dispatchers alike are experiencing exceptionally high levels of operational and critical stress levels.

The inherent nature of public safety requires a certain level of stress on the job. However, the last few years have been particularly challenging for public safety professionals as scrutiny of the profession skyrocketed and a flood of new mandated policies and procedures came down for law enforcement to follow.

As a result of **poor working conditions, increased criticism, and higher liability risks**, the public safety profession is experiencing an uptick in resignations and early retirements. Unfortunately, understaffing causes higher workloads for remaining officers, contributing to more stress and burnout.

Adding to this negative cycle are the **self-made barriers to improving officer wellness**. Although the tides are slowly changing, addressing mental health still carries a negative stigma among law enforcement professionals, many of whom would rather ‘tough it out’ than face judgment or worry about the negative consequences of seeking support. **In fact, less than 1 in 5 officers seek support for their mental health.**



Education

Although staff shortages in education existed before the pandemic, the challenges of remote learning, poor compensation, lack of resources, and frequent politicization of education has made it difficult for many educators to remain in their profession.

A recent NEOGOV survey reports **59% of education HR professionals cite burnout as the top reason for employee turnover**. Poor management, school culture, and red tape requirements also made the list. Data shows the primary driver of departures in the field of education are employees who quit the profession entirely.

Recruiting new educators over the last several years has also been challenging. The ratio of hires to job openings has been less than 1 since 2017, but the gap has widened significantly since the pandemic. HR professionals report the top challenges with recruitment in education are finding qualified candidates, offering competitive salaries, and slow hiring processes.



THE IMPORTANCE OF MORALE

Morale is defined in the dictionary as the confidence, enthusiasm, and discipline of a group at a particular time. When morale is high, employees are naturally more engaged, proactive, and bought-in to the goals and mission of the organization. Teams are usually more upbeat, energized, and motivated to take on challenges. There is a balance between job demands and job resources.

In contrast, an organization suffering from low morale lacks employee engagement, which can look like doing the bare minimum. Employees are less likely to be proactive and take initiative to solve problems. Without enthusiasm for the mission and confidence in the organization, employees may also take more sick leave.

Morale is a critical aspect of any organization – not just for the sake of operational efficiency, but also for the health and wellbeing of employees. Although low morale is often hard to identify, there are proven strategies to help combat low morale and prevent burnout from occurring. Read on to learn how to fight low morale and burnout in your organization.



**WHEN MORALE IS HIGH,
EMPLOYEES ARE NATURALLY
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AND BOUGHT-IN**

NINE BEST PRACTICES

for Fighting Low Morale & Burnout

Workplace burnout and low morale don't develop overnight. Depending on how you look at it, this can be either good or bad. On the one hand, symptoms of burnout and low morale can be hard to identify amidst the chaos of day-to-day operations and confused with other mental health conditions. On the other hand, once you notice burnout and low morale creeping into your organization, there are ways to tip the scales and correct systemic imbalances from becoming worse.



1. ERADICATE TOXIC WORKPLACE BEHAVIOR

McKinsey's [global workforce survey](#) identifies four workplace factors that impact burnout and a person's intent to leave an organization: toxic workplace behavior, a supportive growth environment, sustainable work, and inclusivity.

The survey indicates that all efforts to reduce burnout will not be effective unless toxic workplace behavior is addressed. In other words, organizations must eradicate toxic behavior in addition to implementing other interventions in order to effectively combat low morale and burnout.

Toxic behavior is interpersonal and leaves a person feeling devalued, unsafe, and belittled. While some employees may appear more resilient to toxic behavior, experts caution not to misinterpret individual adaptability as a sign of reduced burnout. While your steeled employees may not show it, they are 60% less likely to tolerate working in a toxic environment and have no qualms finding a less toxic place to work.



POSITIVE WORKPLACE
CULTURE IS BUILT ON
TRUST, OPENNESS,
AND SUPPORT

2. FILL VACANT POSITIONS TO REDUCE STAFF SHORTAGES

The public sector is in the midst of a hiring crisis. As waves of early retirements and voluntary resignations continue to swell, finding qualified candidates to fill open positions is becoming more challenging. While we can't reverse the current labor shortage, we can focus our efforts on proactive recruitment.

Taking a forward-thinking approach to recruitment can position your organization as an employer of choice in a competitive market. Consider alternative candidate sourcing to strategically develop a qualified pool of candidates. Creating a memorable candidate experience is also effective in developing deeper connections with applicants and leaving them with a positive, lasting impression of your organization.

3. BUILD A CULTURE THAT KEEPS EMPLOYEES LONGER

Retaining talent addresses one of the root causes of burnout – voluntary turnover. One of the most effective ways to improve retention is building a strong, positive workplace culture.

Positive workplace culture is built on trust, openness, and support, which leads to higher employee engagement and buy-in. When employees are satisfied with their jobs and feel a sense of purpose and belonging, they're less likely to eye other opportunities.

On the other hand, negative workplace culture can erode morale, derail agency missions, and repel talent. In one study, 48% of people working in low culture organizations were very likely to leave their jobs. To build a strong workplace culture, start by gaining insight into how your employees feel about their jobs through surveys and exit interviews. Listen to their feedback and make any necessary changes.

4. SCHEDULE

FREQUENT CHECK-INS

Communicating regularly with your team offers surprising benefits beyond receiving employee feedback and promoting transparency. Post-pandemic research, which examines management practices in hybrid work environments, suggests **employees are more engaged when managers conduct daily check-ins.**

Similarly, results from Gallup's 2023 State of the Global Workforce survey show **80% of employees who received meaningful feedback from their manager over the past week reported feeling fully engaged at work.** The same survey indicates employees who are actively disengaged with their work are 42% more likely to be looking for other opportunities compared with engaged employees.

5. ENCOURAGE STAFF TO USE

WELLNESS RESOURCES

Creating a psychologically safe working environment where employees feel comfortable asking for help without fear of negative consequences is paramount to fostering employee engagement and combating burnout. But not all leaders set an encouraging tone. **Out of 8000 surveyed law enforcement officers, a staggering 90% reported negative stigma as a barrier to getting support.**

Leaders must model the behaviors they wish to see in their employees. Once they do, employees will follow their lead. There are numerous wellness resources available, including traditional EAP programs and more modern resources like PowerLine, an app providing 24/7 support to first responders. Even encouraging small efforts like limiting caffeine in the afternoons can go a long way to support healthier habits and employee well-being.



6. PROVIDE POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT THROUGH RECOGNITION & COMMUNITY APPRECIATION

Positive, public recognition helps prevent burnout and bolster workplace resilience, according to clinical psychologist Dan Pelton. When done correctly, recognition also helps promote diversity and inclusion within an organization, which fosters a sense of belonging among employees – particularly women. Women are more likely to experience workplace burnout than other groups. But when women receive proper recognition, they are significantly less likely to be burned out.

7. CONSIDER OFFERING ALTERNATE SCHEDULES

Ensuring workloads are sustainable helps prevent and mitigate burnout. Filling empty positions and communicating frequently can relieve overburdened employees, but another effective method is giving employees more predictability of their time. Doing so is shown to reduce rates of voluntary turnover among healthcare shift workers.

Schedule volatility significantly disrupts work-life balance, especially for women and primary caretakers of children. **Unpredictable schedules directly contribute to increased rates of burnout.** With tools like PowerTime, agencies can help prevent overscheduling among public safety professionals and offer staff a transparent look at scheduling.

Hearing appreciation from the community is just as important as hearing it from management, especially for public-facing positions like law enforcement. Morale improves when officers feel recognized and appreciated, especially during times of negative press. Automating positive feedback with PowerEngage ensures first responders receive continuous public recognition to help boost morale.

HEARING APPRECIATION FROM THE COMMUNITY IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS HEARING IT FROM MANAGEMENT





8. ENCOURAGE AND OFFER GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

Offering opportunities for career development and growth is a hallmark sign of a high-performing culture. It's also an effective way to fight burnout, engage employees, and improve retention. But the type of growth opportunities that impact burnout go beyond online training modules and focus more on investing in the individual.

Encouraging individual growth opportunities signals to employees their contributions are valued. Learning new skills can also be a powerful motivator and a reason why employees stay in their roles. Results from a UK study show **94% of the respondents would remain loyal to their current workplace if it invested in their professional development.**

9. LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT EMPLOYEES

Reversing burnout is an iterative process unique to every organization, but research is giving us a clear pathway out of the maze of burnout and low morale. Thanks to technology, all of the strategies discussed in this report to combat burnout and improve morale can be implemented more efficiently and effectively.

Improving operational efficiency with the help of technology is your solution to do more with less, but is more important as labor shortages and voluntary turnover continue. **Public sector organizations must turn to technology to relieve heavy workloads, optimize processes, automate routine tasks, and make the lives of hard working public servants a little easier.**

NEXT STEPS

Thanks for reading the **9 Best Practices for Combating Low Morale & Burnout** by NEOGOV. We hope these insights and resources have been helpful.

NEOGOV serves public sector HR with a comprehensive suite of solutions for recruitment, onboarding, performance management, employee development, and more. **To learn more about this topic and how NEOGOV's software suite can help, [register to attend the Ignite conference today.](#)**

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