

How to Fix What's Sapping Your People's Energy

Frustration and fatigue are an epidemic in the workplace. Here's what savvy business leaders are doing about it.

Keith Ferrazzi

Zoom happy hours? Check. Slack channels for #dogs and #sourdough? Check. Free meditation apps for everyone? Check. Businesses have thrown a lot of solutions at rising frustration, fatigue, and stress in the workplace. Is it working? The jury's out. In June, the CDC reported that 40% of US adults struggled with mental health and substance use issues associated with COVID.

Workplace stress came up strongly on a video call I hosted recently with members of World 50, a private community of business leaders who meet to discover ideas and build lasting relationships, and are partners in our [Go Forward To Work](#) research with Harvard. During group calls, we share best practices that leading organizations are adopting in a time of unprecedented volatility. On the topic of resilience, we burrowed into frustration and fatigue, from performance pressure and worries over balancing work and childcare, to racial injustice.

A thoughtful leader's job is to identify the unique sources of stress in our organizations. With a clear set of actions, you can change the game for a lot of people, yielding winning and engaged mindsets.

First, **discover where the stressors are**. Survey platforms such as Qualtrics and Glint are a good way to do that. Alexion Pharmaceuticals went further and tapped 50 employees to act as "reflectors" and contact 20 or 30 more for feedback, quickly reaching almost 2,000 peers. "People felt their voice was heard and that made a huge impact on employee engagement, as well," says Gianluca Pirozzi, head of clinical development and translational sciences at Alexion.

Here's a list of six prominent workplace stressors and some practices to deal with them.

Meeting fatigue

This working-from-home thing is going to continue long after it's required. It's practical, efficient and people like it. [Gartner research](#) from July found that 82% of organizations will let employees continue to work remotely at least some of the time. But video fatigue is by now well-documented. People's brains have to work harder, especially in the dreaded gallery mode, to make up for all the nonverbal cues we're missing from in-person interactions, not to mention the performance anxiety of watching yourself on screen all the time.

At Ferrazzi Greenlight we perform a process called a "[Remote Reboot](#)" so teams can make their meetings even more productive and engaged than they were before. Be sure your meetings are engineered so that every 15 minutes you are taking a poll, and definitely use breakout rooms for collaborative problem solving or peer-to-peer feedback. Encourage meeting leaders to call on people to share their thoughts -- they'll be more apt to pay attention. Same with giving people different tasks in meetings, and rotating those tasks regularly. Have a different team member keep the minutes of the meeting; track action items, owners and deadlines; and even come up with a fun question to ask everyone at the conclusion of the meeting.

Childcare fatigue

Willow, a manufacturer of a wearable silent breast pump, recently implemented no-meeting Wednesdays, and reduced the number and length of meetings by 20% across the board. "So far it's going really well," says CEO Laura Chambers. With kids back in school (mostly), her operations team shifted meetings to afternoons and everyone can add out-of-office time. "Purple blocks," says Chambers, "are a guilt-free time for people to use when they need to focus on school or go for a walk. And as leaders we're using it, celebrating it and encouraging it."

Mastercard came to the rescue of employees with school-age kids with a Summer Kids Club for 5-12 year olds, coordinating activities such as cooking, dance, and STEM classes. More than a thousand kids signed up for at least 3-4 hours a day, giving parents a much-needed break. The HR team even re-packaged some employee training on topics like cryptology for kids. "Normally it would have taken months to get legal to sign off on something like that. But everyone just rallied and got it done," says Michael Fraccaro, chief human resources officer at Mastercard.

Performance pressure fatigue

Delivering your numbers in the middle of the "pandemic" is possible, but not without some sleepless nights. Kristin Rand, VP of corporate compliance & global risk officer at Moderna,

described the added responsibility felt by the biotech's employees working to develop a vaccine against the coronavirus. "On a daily basis, we give our all ... my colleagues are constantly thinking about the needs of people around the world."

Hundreds of new employees, including Rand, joined Moderna's ranks over the past year. "Providing resources and opportunity for people to feel heard and alleviate stress – by encouraging open dialogue and time away – is paramount," she says. Moderna's CEO and leadership have discouraged Friday afternoon and weekend meetings and made a mindfulness and meditation app available to employees.

Racial injustice and political stress

Racial injustice, protests, and divisive politics have led to further unease, compounding the global health crisis and economy uncertainty. The news can feel overwhelming.

As leaders, we cannot undo the wrongs that have been done, but neither can we continue to stand by and offer tacit approval in the form of silent, passive acceptance of the status quo. Together, we can use our positions of power to take a public stance against systemic racism. We need to collaborate, both inside our corporate walls and across industries to create workplaces of genuine inclusivity, where all voices are heard. It starts with an executive-level commitment to developing a strategic plan to promote diversity and racial equality. In the work we do with executive teams, we begin this process by asking two important questions:

- What are the distinct practices we can implement and steps we can take to dismantle any systemic racism which may exist in our organization?
- What can we do, starting today, to prepare our company for the hard work ahead?

Visit GoForwardtoWork.com to learn more about our Challenge to Eradicate Systemic Racism.

Lack of routines to promote healthy habits

Working from home can slam structured workdays and regular time for exercise, leading some to turn the 30 or 40-minutes they might otherwise have spent commuting into healthy juice breaks, yoga stretches or other physical activity.

Tim Patno, VP of sales at WW Health Solutions, is providing mental wellness tools and healthy tips, such as turning meetings into "learning walks" to prospects. For some, that's meant "taking contracting talks off the table," but has allowed his teams to get closer to those considering wellness and nutrition programs – yielding deeper partnerships. "They've proactively remembered that we showed up in the right way as an organization and are now looking to 2021... picking up the dialogues in a back-to-business way," said Patno.

Isolation fatigue and team bonding

A lot of companies are using group chat platforms such as Slack, Yammer or Microsoft Teams to create communities for parenting and non-work pursuits. Great leaders do more than that to bring teams together. Pam Klyn, VP, product and brands at Whirlpool, gathers employees across teams marking a service anniversary or birthday for a virtual “Ask Me Anything” session. “One might be in the lab, another working on dryers, and I think it might create some interesting connection points for people in shared circumstances,” she said.

Before Covid-19, Krystal Zell, the chief customer officer at Home Depot, would start meetings with people sharing their anxiety on a 1 to 10 scale. Everybody eventually settled at a norm, so if Phil was usually a five and came in at a seven or eight, the team knew to step up. “I loved this system,” says Zell, “because my directs started helping each other in ways you don’t normally see.”

Those sound a lot like the two exercises I recommend for executive teams that I coach. One is a quick meeting starter called a “sweet and sour” where people share one thing that’s going great and something they’re struggling with. The more involved exercise is a “personal-professional check-in,” which is a regular 45-minute meeting just for bonding, with each person taking five minutes to share. Each person gets a chance to reveal what they’re struggling with personally and professionally to their peers. It has been really powerful for all the teams I’ve worked with, not just to relieve frustration and stress but also to create openings for candor later on during hard conversations about the business.

Willow’s Chambers starts meetings with a personal prompt plucked from her school-age daughter: If you were a pair of shoes, what would you be and why? “It’s interesting,” she says, “people say things like, well I feel like a pair of UGG boots because I’m kind of comfortable at home. Or I’m a pair of stilettos because I’m feeling really teetery right now. It’s a fun way to get the creative juices going, and I can’t tell you how appreciative people are of that five or 10 minutes a week. It’s blown me away how needed that was.”

Keith Ferrazzi is chairman and founder of Ferrazzi Greenlight, a team consulting and coaching firm. He is the author of the New York Times best-seller Never Eat Alone and Who’s Got Your Back. His newest book is Leading Without Authority.