

Recognizing Burnout in the Ranks

Leadership Insights from Your Member Assistance Program (MAP)

The Rising Cost of “Running on Empty”

Union leaders know the rhythm of the work: long days, constant problem-solving, and the unrelenting pressure of protecting your members’ interests. It’s demanding work—and often deeply meaningful—but even the most dedicated professionals can run into a wall called **burnout**.

Burnout isn’t a sign of weakness or poor leadership. It’s the cumulative impact of chronic stress, emotional strain, and the impossible expectation to “always be on.” For many tradespeople and union staff alike, burnout can sneak up slowly—camouflaged as dedication or toughness—until it becomes a crisis.

The Signs You Might Be Seeing

Leaders often notice changes in their crews or staff before individuals do themselves. Keep an eye out for:

- Increased absenteeism or “presenteeism” (showing up physically but disengaged)
- Short tempers, frustration, or cynicism toward the job or leadership
- Reduced quality or pride in workmanship
- Withdrawal from union meetings, peers, or family life
- Physical exhaustion or frequent minor illnesses

When these patterns emerge, the instinct might be to push harder or “tough it out.” But recognizing burnout early—and naming it—creates space for genuine recovery and stronger performance over time.

MAP Insight

Burnout thrives in silence. Talking about it in the open—at the hall, in safety meetings, or one-on-ones—signals to your members that mental health is as vital as safety gear on the job.

Leadership at the Crossroads: Supporting a Burned-Out Workforce

As a union leader, you sit at the crossroads between organizational pressure and member well-being. You’re balancing contract negotiations, grievances, community expectations, and the personal challenges your

members bring to you daily. It's no surprise that burnout is contagious—it can spread from the floor to the office, from the crews to the leadership.

The good news: You have tools to interrupt that cycle.

What Leadership Can Do Right Now

- **Model balance:** When leaders show they take breaks, use their benefits, and draw healthy boundaries, it gives permission for members to do the same.
- **Listen early and often:** Regular check-ins—informal and genuine—can surface stress before it explodes into a bigger issue.
- **Acknowledge effort:** Recognition combats one of burnout's main drivers—feeling unseen or unappreciated.
- **Connect to resources:** Remind members that the MAP is confidential and available for any issue—stress, family strain, substance use, or personal loss.
- **Train your leaders:** Equip them to spot early warning signs and refer members to the right help.



Leadership doesn't mean having all the answers—it means cultivating an environment where asking for help is seen as responsible, not risky.

MAP Perspective

Burnout isn't just about overwork—it's also about disconnection. When members feel their effort doesn't matter or their voice isn't heard, stress turns into hopelessness. Restoring purpose and connection is often the best antidote.

Building a Culture that Protects the People Who Build Everything Else

Trade union culture is built on pride, brotherhood and sisterhood, and the belief that solidarity keeps everyone strong. That same solidarity can be a powerful force in preventing burnout.

Building Long-Term Resilience in Your Union

- **Normalize conversations about stress:** Include mental health in toolbox talks and leadership meetings.
- **Encourage peer support:** Experienced members can mentor younger workers on managing workload, finances, and family balance.
- **Promote healthy work schedules:** Advocate for realistic timelines and fair manpower to prevent chronic overtime fatigue.

- **Use your MAP proactively:** Don't wait for a crisis—MAP can provide group education sessions, supervisor training, and policy consultation to strengthen mental health support structures.
- **Celebrate recovery stories:** Encourage members to share how they got through burnout, as it can reduce stigma and reinforce unity.

Every local and district can shape its own culture around well-being. The first step is recognizing that *mental health is a labor issue*. Burnout costs productivity, safety, and morale—but when leadership steps up to address it, the payoff is lasting trust and strength across the ranks.

Final Thought from Your MAP

You don't have to fix burnout alone. Your MAP exists to walk alongside leadership—helping identify patterns, support individuals, and sustain the health of your workforce. Strong unions are built not just on hard work, but on care for the people who do it.

For support, consultation, or to schedule a leadership training on recognizing burnout and building resilience, contact your Member Assistance Program today.

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