

What's To Blame, Burnout or the Boss?

Susan Pinker

Problem Solving Column

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Dear Susan:

I am a female professional with a masters degree working in public policy. After several years at various levels I am facing a career crisis. I am not excited about going to work in the morning. The work does not feel like it is making a difference. I read job descriptions in my field and I don't feel like applying. Plus, I feel my boss does not understand me or my style. She is detail oriented; I am more global. And I wonder about her attitude towards others who are brown-skinned. I am also brown-skinned but have lived in Canada since I was small and I don't have an accent. I hate the thought of covert racism but I am not moving ahead. Do I need a psychologist or is my workplace the problem?

Feeling my Way in the Dark

Dear Feeling:

This is a multiple choice question that should read: Which of the following is true? A. After years in the non-profit sector a knowledge professional could experience burn-out, B. Personality conflicts between supervisors and staff inflame existing stresses, C. Race is the wild card upon which less visible and more complex human problems are pinned.

The answer is D, or all of the above, of course. Your disillusionment is colouring so much of your work experience that nothing seems to fit. Instead of assigning nefarious motives to your boss – finger pointing is the path of least resistance -- consider how your lack of enthusiasm is playing out. You may be a big picture person but you may also be glossing over details because you've lost interest. Feeling redundant can cause your attention to flag. This apathy will be obvious, especially if you were all fired up about what you could accomplish in this job when you started.

While deciding whether you want to stay, set specific objectives for yourself that will tweak your interest, from taking ownership of a project to marshalling your time so that it's better aligned with your values. Assess whether it's safe to approach your supervisor about your desire to make small changes to become more productive. From her perspective there's nothing worse than dragging a balky, unmotivated employee along, with no clue as to why she's not living up to her promise. Come up with non-confrontational, workable solutions instead of leaving it up to her to fix the problem.

If there's an outright mismatch between your values and your organization, you're right that an insightful psychologist can help identify what motivates you. Your provincial psychological association can refer you to psychologists specializing in career counselling. And a book that was published last month, *Banishing Burnout: Six Strategies for Improving your Relationship with Work*, by Michael Leiter and Christina Maslach, can walk you through the steps of identifying what went wrong and how to address it. One predictor of burnout, says Prof. Leiter, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Occupational Health and Wellbeing at Acadia University, is the degree to which your identity and purpose is wrapped up in your job. "When you lose faith that the job is providing that possibility, you're more vulnerable to burnout," he said. People who hold jobs that demand intense engagement without the ability to exert control are particularly at risk, he says.

A burnout is like a sports injury, which can offside an athlete when he thinks he's at the peak of controlling his performance. That's what happened to Lenny Krayzelburg, an Olympic backstroker and gold medalist who was slated to wipe out the competition at the World Championships happening in Montreal right now. After three shoulder surgeries Krayzelburg had to withdraw from the race and adjust his expectations. This spring he renovated the dilapidated community pool where he trained as a new immigrant to Los Angeles, renaming it the Lenny Krayzelburg Swim School. Talking to the *New York Times* in about his recent inability to compete, he says his new goal is to make swimming accessible to the masses. "I love kids. And I still think I can make a difference," he said.

The parallel to you? An injury was the catalyst for Krayzelburg deciding how he would make a difference. A burnout should do the same for you: push you into making active choices instead of resorting to random guessing and the path of least resistance.

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