Burnout Isn't What You Think It Is with special guest Jacqui Brassey (S5: Episode 8)(Transcript)

Chris Congdon: It's the new year and everyone is talking about our goals and resolutions, especially when it comes to our wellbeing. Many of us have personal goals, as well as professional goals, all aiming to increase our mental, physical, social and spiritual health.

Welcome to the Work Better podcast, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon and this is a special bonus episode.

My guest today is going to help us understand how our work can influence, and improve, our holistic health – and maybe even keep those tough resolutions.

Jacqui Brassey is the Co-leader of Healthy Workforces and Director of Research Science at the McKinsey Health Institute, a non-profit aspiring to add years of quality life for people around the world. She's based in Luxembourg and is passionate about helping individuals and organizations thrive by promoting improved mental health, well-being, agility, and resilience.

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CC: Welcome to Work Better, Jacqui.

Jacqui Brassey: Hi, Chris. Thank you. Great to be here.

CC: Well, I'm really excited to talk to you because I think this topic is more important than ever, and particularly as we go into the new year, people are thinking a lot about their health. But I want to start first by just asking you a little bit of background about the McKinsey Health Institute because when I think about McKinsey, the first thing that comes to my mind is a global consultancy that's very well known for very hard business kind of issues and solving those. And so I'm really interested about the background to the McKinsey Health Institute. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

JB: Of course. And thank you for asking that question because there are still a lot of people who do not know what McKinsey Health Institute is. So we got launched on the 1st of April two and a half years ago, and supported by McKinsey, but separate from McKinsey. So we're a non-fee generating institute. And the whole notion that's at the foundation of our work is that basically in the next decade, humanity could add 45 billion extra years of higher quality life. Wow. And Chris, that's massive, right? That's six years per person on average. And so the work that we do is in support of an aspiration to add quality, to add life to years and years to life. And we do that in different ways. We have a number of focus areas, and we talk today about the area that I represent, which is healthy workforces, but we also have brain health, climate and health, and so forth. And we also have initiatives, impact initiatives like healthy cities. And the way we are driving impact behind this aspiration is on the one side by creating research and insights, but also convening leaders and institutions driving innovation and also providing tools and insights.

CC: Well, this is such an important issue, one that employers are thinking about a lot from what we see in our research, and everybody's trying to understand what we can do to help people be healthier at work. And I understand that you think a lot about what you call holistic health, and I'd really like to understand what you mean when you talk about holistic health, but also the role that work plays in helping to create more holistic health or the role it can play, I guess.

JB: Yeah. So holistic health is basically the way we have defined it at McKinsey Health Institute. It consists of four areas of health, and we're standing on the shoulders of many others who have also used those four areas already, which include mental, physical, spiritual, and social health.
And we started to measure this around the world to see what it means and also how it actually one way or the other impacts employees and how it is related to the workplace. But we focus really on holistic health in terms of functioning. So to give you an example, and I will give you a question that we ask people if we talk about social health: I have healthy, nurturing, genuine, and supportive relationships. That's one example. And an example of spiritual health, because people often think they don't really know what this means. This is all about something that they may not understand. It's actually we have focused only on the area of meaning and purpose, and we ask people questions like: I integrate meaning into my life. So those four areas came together in one term, holistic health, and you could look at it as almost being a positive notion of health and healthy functioning. And why is it important to be aware of that and how the workplace contributes to that? The workplace can matter a lot to the experience of holistic health because positive experiences at work are related and associated with holistic health. That's what we found in the research that we did in 30 countries. And so I like to think, Chris, of work being important to health beyond only thinking of work and takeaway health, which we have learned a lot about right in the last couple of years, especially since Covid.

CC: And it feels like a lot of organizations, at least in the past, focused a lot on physical health. They were trying to help their employees exercise, be at a healthy weight, and have a good ergonomic setup when they're coming into the workplace. But it feels like when I talk to particularly HR leaders, but leaders throughout the organization, it feels like the conversation has really shifted more toward mental and social health. People might not use that language, but they're thinking very much about things like loneliness and mental health issues, and particularly burnout. Burnout seems to be a big conversation right now. And I'm really interested because you said that a lot of organizations care about burnout, but what they're measuring is exhaustion. Can you pull that apart for us? What's the difference between exhaustion and burnout? Because I tend to think about them like they go together.

JB: Yeah, actually, by the way, physical health is important also to social and mental and spiritual health. They are very closely correlated, so they're all kind of symbiotic. So, yeah, it remains important. And you'll see that in our report as well, that we just launched with the World Economic Forum. But the holistic health notion is actually the other side of, if you think about health and wellbeing on the normal distribution curve, right? Then holistic health is closer to positive psychology, thriving wellbeing, where burnout is a construct that actually looks at more ill health from a mental health perspective. And that's more where clinicians often work. And in burnout, we measure four elements. So we work with researchers in the Netherlands and in Belgium that defined burnout as a construct that has four dimensions as well. Exhaustion is one of them. And what is often reported in the news is exhaustion. Because if you, and I would love to use this opportunity also to ask people to be healthily critical when they read something, look at what people really measure. Nine out of ten times, when they say people feel burned out, they ask it with one question. Often it's a question related to exhaustion, which in general is much higher than the other factors. The other factors in burnout include mental distance, cognitive impairments, and emotional impairment. So that has a lot to do with can you control your emotions? Do you feel that you can regulate your emotions? Do you feel empathic or the opposite? Right? And can you still, it's actually very close to brain health. Can you actually do your work to your full capacity? And what we see is exhaustion is an important element, but it's not enough. And by the way, the other thing, Chris, that is very important is that when we look at burnout in the workplace, we look at burnout symptoms. These are complaints. These are not real clinical burnouts. People around the world, there is not even an agreement on what burnout really means, but that's maybe for another podcast. But people can still work even if they have these symptoms. That's also something that we found in our research.

CC: Well, that's interesting. Could you tell me a little bit more about that, Jacqui? Because I hear a lot of people, and maybe we don't even know as employees, how to define what we're feeling or how to articulate it, but I do hear a lot of people say, I'm starting to feel burned out and the sense that because I'm feeling burned out, I need to take a vacation or I need to go take a spa day or something like that. And one, are we describing it the right way in terms of what we're feeling, but also is that what's going to help people recover from burnout?

JB: I think number one, it's very important for people, and I'm glad that you bring this up, for people to understand what it means for them to feel energized and positive and engaged versus when they feel tired and disengaged and depleted and start understanding the symptoms not only from a mental perspective or thinking about it, but also start learning what are your bodily signals. In general, Chris, stress is not bad. We often talk about stress as if it's a negative thing, but it is actually very important to perform and to learn and to grow. But the aspect that's very important is to learn when do you need to actually keep going? Because sometimes you do need to meet your deadline, sometimes you need to grit through versus how do you build in recovery in your program, in your work schedule so that you can actually get enough energy to continue and to have a sustainable way of working. And that's how we talk a lot about it in the work that we do. And therefore, it's also important to know that I often get the question about where does the responsibility lie? Is that with the organization? Is it with the team or is it with the individual? And the truth is our research shows it as well. It is a bit of everything. The employees need to learn actually, because everybody's different. And what's eventually pushing one person over the edge in terms of burnout versus the other can be different thresholds, different expectations. We all come with different backpacks to work. And so it's an important skill set almost to have so that you know how to speak up and how to find help. But at the same time, it's also important for organizations to understand what they can do and how they can set their people up for success. And the other thing that we clearly found is it's not only the right thing to do, it's also a smart thing to do because it'll be good for performance and productivity as well.

CC: Sure. Well, let's just talk a little bit about the situation that's happening overall. I mean, I feel like talking about wellbeing has been something, at least we've been thinking about it for decades, but it feels like this is a conversation that's just really kind of exploded and come to the forefront. And I'm wondering about your research or your thinking about why this has become such an issue. I think there's a lot of, I'm curious what your research is finding and are we starting to actually make some progress or do you feel like things are just really getting worse?

JB: Great question. I'm curious to learn from what your findings are as well, what your observations are. Chris, I could name three things and I trust that won't be surprising, but of course what most of the listeners know is that the awareness for this subject, of course this is for you, it's already long time and for many others as well. But the global visibility and awareness around these topics really grew around COVID and the pandemic when we started to work from home much more and we became much more aware of health and how important it is and how that relates to work. So that is the awareness has increased, that's for sure. And so with that literacy in a way as well, but we're still trying to figure out what exactly. Two is that work as a result has increasingly in an accelerating way also been organized differently. So the way people work and hybrid work, distance work in the office, all kinds of new ways of working and 24 hours a day and more global connection. And then three is the combination of massive acceleration of technology. Of course, the hype around AI and what that will bring to our way of working. The expectation that in the next 10 years jobs will transform and therefore we will continue to learn new things and our jobs will transform. And then on top of that, the unpredictability in the world, the volatility. And so bringing that all together is impacting people in so many ways. And therefore there is a massive opportunity for on the one side learning and becoming aware and integrating this topic much better in the way we work and in the way we live, that it's not that easy. So it has increased and I think the impact on people's health and wellbeing has increased, but it's a combination of increased awareness and increased changes. And so distilling the true we will learn more in the next couple of years when we continue to do research.

CC: Yeah, I agree with everything you've said. And an additional thing about work changing that we've observed is really the growth of screen-based work and how screen-based work is actually happening more frequently than in person. And that really leading to this kind of new pattern of behavior of one, you have one virtual meeting right after the next, this kind of scheduling that is, it feels like it's a staccato-like boom, boom, boom, boom, boom throughout the day in terms of your meetings and people not even being able to take a break between meetings. And it also leading to this really extended work hours where you don't walk away from the office and then be done with it because you've got the technology that enables you to be able to stay connected and do things into your evening. And so the extension of the work hours. And we also see people not getting up and going to a meeting in person when they can stay at their desk and participate virtually, which has some impact, I would believe, on their social health and wellbeing. So yeah, there's a lot that it really feels like people are trying to juggle right now that's making work difficult. So Jacqui, I wanted to talk about something else from your research that I think is a really interesting way to think about it, which is you talk about demands and enablers of holistic health, and I think that's a really interesting thing that our listeners would love to hear a little bit more about your thoughts about how these two things work together. What's good, what's bad about those things?

JB: We love to know what's good, what's bad, right? Well, it depends of course. So when we do the research for healthy workforces, we always want to work evidence-based as much as we can, yet practical and so relevant also for the world of business. And so the topics that we test, the demands and enablers actually come from research a model that's called job demands and resources. Everybody has job demands and resources or demands and enablers, which means you may have parts of your work that are demanding that can cause stress or that cause extra effort that ask for extra effort. And examples of demands are role ambiguity, role conflict, work pressure, job insecurity. But a big one that we also looked at is toxic behavior. Now a lot of these are actually associated negative stress, but it doesn't need to be, although toxic workplace behavior inherently is negative, but role conflict and role ambiguity doesn't need to be negative if you have the skills and enough resources to handle it to work through it.

CC: Yeah.

JB: Exactly. But if you have too much of that, eventually it can put too much strain on you. Now the resources or the enablers of work are the elements of work that give you energy and that help you unlock some of the demands. And the theory behind it is if you find a good balance, then work, you can be at your best at work because there is no way that work never has demands. And then enablers are about finding meaning, psychological safety, but also growth and learning a sense of belonging. But two very important individual skill sets are part of that as well. And that is self-efficacy and adaptability, having the skills to handle stress and having the skills to handle and unpredictability and that will help you very much with the demands. Now what we found, so we asked a lot of questions in 30 countries of 30,000 people, and basically we threw all these questions and these constructs in a machine and then did some analytical modeling. And then we looked at what is actually driving holistic health versus what is driving burnout. Are they the same or is it just one is the absence of the other. And what's fascinating, Chris, is that everything is part of outcomes, but the demands are much more predictive of burnout. Now I say it sounds very logical and the resource enablers are much more predictive of positive health. And why we wanted to know that was also, and also to emphasize that in our research, first of all, you can actually find people in the workplace that feel they have positive holistic health, but still high on burnout symptoms and everything. You can put 'em on a two by two and then you have basically four categories, but also the way to solve for one. So the way to reduce burnout symptoms requires focus on different interventions then if you want to drive holistic health. And that was a big aha and that's a big point of discussion in many of the conversations that we have with organizations because with great intent, so much work has put into wellbeing by so many organizations all over the world, but there were struggling to move the needle and often they were doing actually the wrong things to solve a particular problem where they were actually not solving the problem. That's basically why we have made that distinction.

CC: So Jacqui, I want to probe into this one a little bit because I think it'll be really helpful and I'm actually trying to get my head wrapped around it. So are you saying that very well-meaning organizations in an attempt to help improve burnout, that they're actually causing more of a problem?

JB: No, I think than solving for it, what I don't want to say is they're causing more of a problem, but they were not solving it per se. So what you see a lot, Chris, and that is very important that companies do that. They have invested a lot in an infrastructure to help people when they're actually already in need of help, basically being responsive to when people need mental health support or where they already have burnout and they need support for burnout or for other health problems. Like think of having a wonderful EAP program or having a psychologist in the office or have people trained up that offer help when the issue is there.

CC: I see.

JB: That's important but is more responsive. That's one example where actually the request coming in now more and more is how can we be preventative for people not to actually go into burnout, but that's one. The other, to really answer your question, sometimes organizations would run particular workshops on psychological safety or workshops on inclusion without addressing the real issues that are driving burnout, which if people really are in a state of burnout, then inclusion alone without actually alleviating the demands or helping these people where they really suffer is going to tackle the problem or a yoga training on Friday afternoon, which I mean I love yoga, but it's very good for health that's not solving the problem. So it's really about how can you understand the true issue that you're trying to solve? And for most organization, it's a combination of a couple of factors. You don't have a hundred percent of your people in a state of burnout, but understand where and when. And especially for team leaders, this is important when a person really is in need for immediate help related to burnout versus where somebody is just demotivated and not happy at work and needs a challenge, that's a very different solution than the other one. And that is the literacy that I hope managers can learn and organizations can also integrate in their learning and development programs.

CC: So Jacqui, would it be more helpful to begin to address the problem by starting to look at the demands that are on people and starting to make sure that the demands are at least appropriate for the enablers that people have? Is that kind of the way that you can help begin to address the problem?

JB: Yeah, I think the key message is understand your baseline and I know where you have what's happening for your people, know what your problem is, and most organizations don't even know what the problem is. So if they don't know if people are low on holistic health or if they're low on burnout, then you don't even know where to start.

CC: I see.

JB: That's one. And then if you know your baseline for your organization and there is a very high proportion of people that actually suffer from burnout symptoms then, and you can do that by a survey, I would also try to find out indeed, what are the demands that are causing this? But what is always relevant is I think what is most important to think about your whole wellbeing strategy for the next four or five years. And that includes a program of different solutions. But if your burnout symptoms are very high, I would much rather start with looking at, okay, where's the friction? What are the demands? At the same time? To give you an example why people sometimes confuse these topics, you can have very purposeful work and you can really love the organization that you work for. And I see there's a lot in humanitarian organizations where people really work with a purpose for the work they do, and there's always something to solve out there. What they forget to do is really take care of themselves and manage the demands because it's a nonstop list of things to do, right? And yes, then I would say make sure that you understand for yourself how you balance, how you recover, but also as an organization, and I would say these particular topics are best solved at team level because it's very hard to put an organization structure in place with the world that we live in today to tackle for everything from a corporate center. I would say enable build autonomy and let teams actually enable teams to tackle this and to build that buffer and be flexible to help the individuals in the team to sort this particular topic. And we've been testing that in a number of organizations and it's very important to have that flexibility, but that requires for people a certain set of skills and an understanding what does it mean, how do I handle this, how do I have the conversation around this? How do I take care of myself as a team leader whilst also taking care of my team and manage the business agenda because there, there's so much going on.

CC: Well, I think it's just really helpful just to think about it at a team level because I think sometimes organizations are trying to think about it across the whole organization and it feels like what one team needs might be very different from what another team needs. So I think that is very helpful. In our work, we think a lot about the physical space and what job it can do in terms of helping people to work better. And I'm curious about what you think about that. What are things that we could do within the physical experience that people have when they come into the workplace that might be able to impact their holistic health?

JB: Yeah, I think so much, so much. I found some research from DE University, my own country, and they actually found the impact of the physical work environment very important, linking to physical health and wellbeing as well as of course social wellbeing, but it can help and hinder. So open office spaces and noise is often can negatively impact health for some people. Shared rooms, it depends on what people's preference is. And at the same time, office spaces where there's a lot of green, where there is a lot of support for physical exercise and also good daylight, I mean it makes a massive impact on the way people can collaborate but also have an experience of work.

CC: Yeah, we think a lot about of course the physical experience and how that can help with physical health, but also creating spaces that basically create the conditions to help foster the social wellbeing or the mental wellbeing, allowing people to manage the sensory experience that they're facing when they come into the workplace. So I think you're right that it is all part of that holistic picture. Jacqui, before I let you go, I want to ask you about something you said a moment ago where you were talking about looking out after your own well-being, so you're going to be able to support others. And I'm curious about some of the personal practices or routines that you follow that help you have holistic wellbeing at work.

JB: Yeah, there are quite a few. I use a term always that I call it what is my personal operating model and that sometimes that changes, but there are a few non-negotiables as I call them as well, Chris. And one of them is I try to exercise to walk every day, so in between calls. But if that's not possible, I always reserve an hour of walking in the evening to offload. And often when I can with my husband to offload from the day to connect and to, it's very important to me. I have, as I said, standing desk and even a treadmill, but I also do breathing exercises if I feel I need to relax. And in the morning I've asked my EA also to manage my agenda, my diary, and in the morning I actually double check if my day is full with back to backs, then I actually reorganize a few calls because it's not healthy to go on back to back to back without a breath in between. So I try to do that as much as I can and also knowing that if there is a week where there is no space for that because of important deadlines, I always look at, okay, how do I find time after that to recover? So can I actually free up space? So there are tons of things and sometimes I adjust it a little bit depending on the needs making of course, time for the family. There's always a block in my calendar for dinner times.

CC: As people often set New Year's resolutions, those sound like a few things that you can easily make a priority that may seem difficult, but just even blocking out time to make sure that you're spending time with your family. I know it sounds crazy, but sometimes you literally have to use your schedule to protect times to walk or times to interact with other people. So maybe those are some things our listeners can think about for their New Years. Jacqui, it has just been so great talking to you today. I feel like I've learned so much and so I'm just going to encourage everybody, maybe listen to this episode a couple times, like bookmark it and save it because I think Jacqui's got some really good advice for us and we look forward to also seeing the research report that's coming out again. Can you tell us one more time, Jacqui, what the name of that is?

JB: It's on Healthy Workforces and it's in collaboration with the World's Economic Forum at McKinsey Health Institute. I keep the title still a secret, but if you Google that, then you will find it.

CC: Okay, perfect. Well, thank you so much for being here with us today on Work Better.

JB: It was great to be here. Thank you so much for having me.

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