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## Working in the Burnout Shop

Calling a business a “burnout shop” was a popular phrase in the early days of Silicon Valley. It was an exciting time in the tech boom. New start-ups were formed, money was flowing, and companies needed to hire workers. Companies’ want ads even bragged about their reputations as burnout shops. The hours would be long (the concept of 24 / 7 was invented here), the work would be challenging, and everyone would have to sacrifice a lot of their personal lives for this particular quest. After a few years, employees would burn out—but even if they were unable to work anymore, they would leave with some promising stock options in a fledgling business.

Working in the burnout shop was like an all-out sprint, with people going as fast as they could under extreme conditions.

What characterizes the burnout shop of today? To put it simply, the sprint is now a fast-paced marathon. The short-term strategy of self-sacrifice and speed has become the long-term operating model for many businesses. As one consultant put it, “Everyone’s job is now an extreme job.”<sup>1</sup> But running at a sprint pace cannot be sustained over a long period; it leads to debilitating consequences such as ongoing stress experiences, physical exhaustion, sleep deprivation, poor job performance, and disruptions of personal and family life. The mismatches between people and their jobs have been getting even worse.

### Workplace Stressors

Some might say that dealing with stress is a common part of everyday life, whether at work or home or anywhere else. So what is the problem here? Just

what goes on in burnout shops that makes them especially stressful? The answer lies in two characteristics of the stressors they commonly present. First, a workplace stressor typically involves a serious *mismatch* (or imbalance, or bad fit) between the person and the job. Second, the stressor is *chronic*—it causes stress repeatedly, perhaps every day, for reasons that are difficult to change. Chronic stressors take more of a physical and psychological toll on people than do occasional stressors (such as unanticipated challenges or emergencies, when everyone must jump in to do more than usual to fix the situation). When chronic stressors also involve mismatches, the result is erosion—a wearing-away of one’s ability to cope effectively, to be involved in one’s work, and to take pride in one’s achievements. These everyday stressors may be little things, such as rude or sarcastic comments from fellow workers, or bureaucratic processes that are tedious or disruptive, but their erosive effect over time can be considerable. Six chronic mismatches in particular combine to shape the characteristic features of the burnout coal mine.

## WORK OVERLOAD



The burnout shop is an “always-on” work culture, where job demands are high and continue to keep piling up, and resources necessary to meet those demands (such as time, tools, goals, support) are often insufficient. In many of today’s companies, the explicit directive to “do more with less” is demoralizing and confusing, and undermines employees’ energy, involvement, and competence. It is no surprise that many people compare this experience to that of Sisyphus, the Greek mythological character who was condemned for eternity to push a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down just before it reached the top. Despite their hard work, people are not sure they are making any meaningful progress.

In many cases, increasing workloads demand people's efforts beyond the traditional boundaries of work hours. If the work cannot get done on time in the workplace, then employees may have to work overtime, or take work home to finish it there, or even take on extra job tasks to get the project completed. In other words, "Overwork happens." A culture of working long hours assumes that productivity rises when salaried employees spend more time at work—especially as "people deliver under pressure." There is not, however, much support for this assumption. Instead, much evidence shows links between working long hours and illness, as well as lower productivity.<sup>2</sup>

Especially dispiriting to people is having their plate overfilled with tasks that are not a match for their capability level and that do not contribute to their strengths at performing the job they were hired to do. In medicine, for example, physicians have invested heavily to gain their expertise and are most happy working extra hours if they are "working at the top of their license"—that is, performing the highest-level services they are qualified to render. Administrative busy work—like populating electronic medical records—is bottom-of-the-license work. Tasks like this, and equivalents in other jobs—like generating reports that no one reads and completing online training modules unrelated to one's work—fall into the category of "illegitimate tasks" that people resent doing.<sup>3</sup> Workers are required to accomplish these tasks within regular work hours, but they experience them as a burden, or a drain on the time and energy that they could be devoting to more important work. An irony comes when managers (who normally champion an on-task focus) must enforce policies that divert employees' finite energy to trivia.

For many, the workday is stretched further by a commute that keeps getting longer. Housing close to urban workplaces has become increasingly expensive while wage stagnation has constrained the amount of money people have available for housing. Housing prices outstrip the capacity of people to pay because urban properties have become investment vehicles supported by vast pools of wealth searching for attractive returns on investment. Housing supply remains tight due to zoning constraints in many places. Across a recent five-year period, the number of "super-commuters" (those commuting more than ninety minutes each way) rose by 40 percent in ten US states.<sup>4</sup> That time feels more like "work" than leisure, and people are not getting paid for it.

This expanding workload often comes with personal costs, as reflected in oft-heard complaints like “no work-life balance is fostered,” and “unpaid overtime is expected.” Employees may be reluctant to say no to requests to do extra work because they fear they might not be promoted, or might be demoted or shut out of opportunities, or might even lose their jobs. Feeling they have to work more hours, even when “off-duty,” puts strain on their personal lives. It erodes their relationships with family and friends, and harms their health and well-being. As one hospital worker we know told us, “There is a culture of high stress in our department due to high workload, which results in a constant high anxiety and low mood. This impacts staff morale. The level of high stress and anxiety for me personally has resulted in significantly high levels of sick leave for myself, and high medical bills. I have been thinking about leaving the workplace as a result.”

The boundary between work and home was greatly eroded during the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced many people to “work from home” rather than leave their home to do their job in another place. The hours devoted to their jobs—as opposed to the rest of their lives—became blurry, in terms of both the numbers of hours and when they took place during the day or night. There were reports of people devoting even more hours to work when they were at home than when they had been in the workplace. For some, this was a response to a period when they saw others losing jobs. As the pandemic wore on, people were more afraid for their own livelihoods and worked harder to stay employed.

Workload is not just about hours, however. An even more important aspect can be the emotional burden involved. This is especially true for healthcare and human services providers, as well as first responders, who deal with patients and clients under very emotionally stressful conditions. The emotional labor inherent in such work can intensify especially when caseloads expand. This burden became overwhelming during the pandemic, when healthcare workers faced the need to care for huge numbers of severely ill Covid-19 patients while trying to avoid getting sick themselves and bringing illness home to their families. Some had the heartbreaking experience of keeping families away from loved ones and being the only people with suffering patients when they died. Many doctors, nurses, and others who have worked many years in health care have said that they have never felt so burned out in their lives.

This speaks to another factor contributing to a work overload mismatch beyond sheer volume of work and its emotional toll: a heavy workload is more exhausting when someone does not have the capacity or opportunity to recover and bounce back. Without effective, ongoing recovery processes, people only become increasingly tired, worn out, and unenthusiastic about going back to the job the next day. An executive coach we know works with high-tech leaders under enormous pressure at their companies. “Good athletes,” he observes, “have learned how to turn on their stress hormones and respond when they absolutely have to, then release and relax. But in Silicon Valley, the stress response is turned on all the time, even when stress is not there.”

## **LACK OF CONTROL**



The burnout shop is often characterized by problems in power dynamics, such as micromanagement, incompetent leadership, and ineffective teams. Too often, people are denied the necessary autonomy to do their jobs well, sometimes by being excluded from critical decisions relevant to their work. Feeling ignored, limited, manipulated, distrusted, and undermined brings greater uncertainty and frustration to their daily work-lives. People feel fear and anxiety about doing their work correctly and potentially being punished (even demoted or fired) for getting things wrong. At the same time, they feel angry, resentful, and alienated being constantly second-guessed, overruled, and shut out of any efforts to improve or innovate. Workers who do not have an appropriate amount of autonomy over the work they do, who are unable to make choices and exercise discretion to do it well, simply do not feel effective in their jobs.

Also constraining and limiting individuals' control and options are often situational factors. For example, in occupations focused on direct interaction with clients or patients, the sheer number of people with whom an employee

must engage can be overwhelming. When the patient or client load becomes too great, quantity compromises quality. People no longer have the option to provide the level of service or treatment they would choose to render—especially as time limits tend to be imposed, such as “no more than fifteen minutes per person.” As the attention and effort allowed for each case is minimized, workers can succumb to callous, even cynical, “processing” of clients or patients. Consider the situation of lawyers doing legal-aid work. “I have so often seen good, competent lawyers begin to process people like machines, rarely doing more than placing their problem into a category to be recorded and mechanically dealt with,” one worker reports. “I have watched the same attorneys lose their enthusiasm, their creativity, and their commitment. People are dealt with and described in statistical terms, in general rather than in particular, and as part of a stream of problems rather than as human beings.”<sup>5</sup>

Health care is famously a profession in which high patient loads, along with stepped-up requirements for digital record-keeping, have left many physicians feeling like mere cogs in a machine over which they have no control. Educators also tend to be responsible for many people, at all levels from elementary schools to universities. One college instructor described how heavy workload translates to diminished autonomy: “The experience of burnout is different from simply feeling fatigued or exhausted; it typically stems from a lack of perceived control that leads people to feel overwhelmed and ‘at the end of their rope.’”<sup>6</sup>

Beyond autonomy in specific job tasks, workers also want to feel they have control over their schedules and earnings—and many have lost ground here, too. Even if they have agreed to work extra hours, they may find themselves unable to take compensatory time off to regain the personal time they lost. Wanting the predictability of a reliable schedule, some instead see their (and their family members’) lives disrupted by work hours that shift from week to week, or by needs to respond to unanticipated work needs on short notice. For many, the unsettling sense of not being in control of income and work hours was greatly exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Where workers feel a lack of autonomy, often that sense is a relative one—a contrast with a level of independence they used to have—and often the culprit is a new manager. After a restructuring of a hospital’s organization took place, an employee complained about the rising burnout on her team:

“This is not a gripe about that restructure—however, it is a reflection on how this individual chooses to manage the team, ignoring the way the team prefers to work, which is predominantly fixed in a culture of respect, authenticity, and collaboration. The new manager’s style does not allow for this collaboration, autonomy, or freedom—nor is there allowance for diversity of thought, or the space for error or disagreement.” She described the dispiriting atmosphere the team now experienced: “What prevails is an autocratic *do as I tell you*, divide-and-conquer mentality. Every aspect of the work is micromanaged, and the person spends hours reworking the written work done by team members or others in the organization, and even those external to the organization.” Clearly, bosses in organizations have power invested in their positions and are expected to exercise authority, but if the manner in which they do this creates chronic feelings of lack of control, they not only damage efficacy but also engender cynicism. Their actions signal a lack of faith that others around them believe in the organization’s mission and know how to advance it.

## INSUFFICIENT REWARDS



In burnout shops, people often feel they are not reaping sufficient rewards—financially, socially, or emotionally—for the hard and high-quality work they are doing. Of course, for many, the most important rewards are the intrinsic ones that come with making progress in meaningful and challenging work. They become frustrated and depressed to the extent that their jobs bog them down in trivial tasks and discouraging cases or projects. But extrinsic rewards matter, too, and many experience their pay as too low, benefits as too few, and promotions as too infrequent. They feel unrecognized and underappreciated, believing their accomplishments are routinely ignored, even when they have gone above and beyond what was needed. Positive feedback is rare, while negative feedback may be plentiful. Indeed, when



asked to describe “a good day” on the job, many workers reply, “When nothing bad happens.” Evidently, having “something good happen” is too rare or unreasonable to expect. Living with such a low standard for one’s daily experience reflects frustration and disappointment, and provides little motivation to do one’s best work.

Sometimes to provide a desirable reward an organization decides to set up a contest, or generally promote rivalry among the staff, on the assumption that competition will motivate everyone to work harder and better. Competition, however, also sends other messages. One is that employees succeed by defeating each other, which prioritizes individual gain over collective benefit. Another message is that there can be only one winner and all others are, by definition, losers. As an example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, most schools and colleges switched from teaching students in person to teaching them online. This unexpected change had to be enacted instantly, which called for enormous efforts by course instructors to quickly revamp their teaching methods, become adept in using unfamiliar technologies, and learn how to deal with students attending classes and taking tests remotely. It was a huge challenge that required long hours and hard work to maintain teaching excellence and deliver it successfully. At one school, instructors received an announcement requesting their nominations for a set of distinguished teaching awards during the pandemic. This attempt to name a few among them as “best” was not well received. “Why can’t the school do something that recognizes all of us,” one asked, “like a letter of thanks or some small gift of appreciation? Why does recognition have to be a competition, which will leave a lot of us with bad feelings, because we are not as valued?”

At times, social rewards are lacking simply because people are so overloaded by work that they forget to give positive feedback or to thank each other for working longer and harder. In some settings, however, their absence reflects a mistaken belief that the best way to motivate people is with negative reprimands, penalties, and punishments. In fact, positive reinforcement can be far more effective.<sup>7</sup>



## BREAKDOWN OF COMMUNITY



In burnout shops, the always-on culture of fear is particularly damaging when it poisons people's relationships with their coworkers. Instead of viewing their colleagues as supportive and trustworthy, people may come to suspect that they are surrounded by people "only in it for themselves" and willing to do anything to get ahead. Under such conditions, they do not seek out advice or help, lest they reveal a weakness that could be used against them. Thus, work environments allegedly designed to win the race to success and innovation can actually undermine the effective collaboration and teamwork required for these. The system pushes people toward their worst behaviors—selfish actions at the expense of others' well-being and the organization's mission.

Any workplace can be vulnerable to the bad behaviors that take place in the society around it. Workers can be targeted, for example, by racist and sexist remarks if their colleagues harbor such prejudices. But the always-on intensity and exhaustion of burnout shops make it more likely that antisocial behaviors will erupt, go unchecked, and lead to community breakdown. These behaviors can occur at all employee levels of the organization. Sometimes they occur between team members, or among staff with similar jobs or positions—and they often involve things like name-calling, making sarcastic remarks, talking behind a colleague's back, or trying to belittle or intimidate one's colleagues. Such behavior among peers has been described as horizontal violence.<sup>8</sup> It is not always clear what the reasons are for horizontal violence, but it has been argued that when people are stressed and oppressed by the system in which they are working, and feel unable to fight back against those constraints, they may relieve the tension by striking out at members of their own group.

Consider two very different realms in which such horizontal violence can be seen. The first is among the community of social activists, who work passionately in support of humanitarian causes (such as promoting peace or

fighting climate change) but earn little for doing so, and are at risk for burnout because of this dedicated commitment and sacrifice. When seventy-five such activists were surveyed about the rewards and stressors of their work, the intriguing finding was that “relationships with other activists” proved to be their most common reward *and* most common stressor.<sup>9</sup> A comment by one sheds light on how resentments can arise: “I feel overwhelmed, and sometimes I look at the stuff I have to do and I get angry. Like, why doesn’t somebody else do some of this stuff? Why is it just me? And I begin to think that other people don’t have the same dedication.”<sup>10</sup>

The second example is from tech workers in the field of cybersecurity, who struggle with huge work overloads and have no control over when security incidents will suddenly occur and how long it will take to respond. There are too few people working in this area—the number of unfilled positions is enormous. Yet, a big part of the problem, people in the field are now realizing, is that even when workers are recruited into these positions, cultures of horizontal violence drive too many away. Exhaustion combines with what one industry insider described as a tendency toward “egocentric, gatekeeping territoriality” to cause veterans to be hypercritical and dismissive rather than supportive of their newly hired colleagues. And therefore the exhaustion of their heavy workloads continues.<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes uncivil social behavior is not laterally directed but comes from the top, from bullying bosses. One executive coach describes this as “red-ink behavior” because a manager’s tirades, needling, and intimidation lead to lost productivity and financial losses.<sup>12</sup> This kind of management style is often associated with other disruptive interpersonal behaviors, such as being unsupportive and quick to assign blame after a failure has occurred, having difficulty responding to critical feedback, and not working well with others. It may be that some of these leaders are suffering their own burnout, and their reaction to the experience is sowing the seeds of burnout all around them.

Whether they come at people horizontally or vertically, toxic encounters are exhausting. They prompt intense emotions that linger physically and mentally through rumination well after the event. They undermine the sense of psychological safety, deny people a sense of belonging, and undermine core values. Even when other mismatches are not in play—say, workloads are reasonable and autonomy is high—community breakdown in a workplace can, on its own, push people toward burnout.

## ABSENCE OF FAIRNESS



The burnout shop is often an unfair place—decisions are viewed as unjust, people are not treated with respect, and various processes and outcomes are biased and discriminatory. Unfair treatment marks its targets as lacking legitimacy in the community, excluding them from full membership, and injustice can move directly to exploitation. Working under such conditions, employees quickly develop a high degree of cynicism.

A sense of unfairness is an important offshoot of power dynamics. Critical decisions about the distribution of rewards and punishments, tasks and priorities, and individual career tracks have direct implications for people's ability to manage their workloads and potential to do meaningful work. Decisions by powerful individuals or groups often are made outside of most employees' control.

Concerns about fairness often focus on favoritism—perceptions that the CEO or the managers like some people and dislike others. Those seen as favorites may appear to be pandering to the boss's ego in illegitimate ways. Those who are targets of scorn may seem to have been singled out because they raised concerns in the past, or have personalities or opinions different from the boss's. In either case, employees perceive that key decisions are shaped by personal likes and dislikes rather than objective evaluations of merit.

More extensive injustice arises from systemic biases built into the structure of workplaces, their policies, and their practices. For much of recorded history in many parts of the world, race and sex explicitly determined eligibility for high-status positions. By now, legal sanctions and social norms have for the most part banished such explicit discrimination, but workplaces still fall well short of fair access to opportunity. One dynamic arises from the implicit biases individuals bring to decision processes. These were revealed, for instance, in a now-famous study of the effects of “blind auditions” for

symphony orchestras. When screens were installed so that juries listened to performances without seeing the players, the proportion of women advancing through the process and ultimately hired by orchestras increased significantly. Removing cues as to the candidates' demographic qualities eliminated the role that unconscious biases about male versus female musicians had been playing in the choices and focused evaluators completely on the auditory experience.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond individual biases, unequal treatment (including pay discrimination) can result from organizational norms and expectations of how people prove themselves in their jobs. In a company, for example, that prides itself on the royal treatment it provides to demanding customers, it may be a prerequisite for a position that an employee always be available to jump in whenever and wherever needed by a client. Yet women in the workforce are more likely than their male counterparts to have family responsibilities that demand predictability or flexibility in their work hours. Such clashes between what companies and some employees prefer and need result in constrained opportunities. Thus, considerations that make no explicit reference to gender or other attributes can still block access to higher-status positions, cutting off the pathways to top positions on boards and executive teams.<sup>14</sup>

## VALUES CONFLICT



In burnout shops, people's relationship to their work can also be undermined by values conflicts, especially when job requirements clash with moral principles. An employee may feel compelled to do something unethical, such as tell a lie (to make a sale, or get a necessary authorization, or cover up a mistake). Sometimes an organization itself has conflicting values, preaching one thing while practicing another. For example, it may emphasize the imperative to be customer-centric ("we always do what serves the customer best") but, in a challenging quarter, instruct salespeople to push certain

products as much as they can, regardless of whether they are the best fit for a customer's need. Or it may call work-life balance a core value, but promote only employees who travel extensively or work over weekends. Often, multiple values are declared to be fundamental, but are to some degree incompatible, leaving people unclear on which takes priority.

Typically, the kinds of values that the most dedicated employees bring to their work are antithetical to the values system of a workplace focused on maximizing profitability or fending off short-term threats to survival. In all too many situations, people under pressure do things that feel wrong to them because those actions serve their employers' objectives—accepting that morally corrosive philosophy that the ends justify the means. If the mismatch between what their values dictate and what they feel compelled to do is large, then the potential for burnout is high.

A workplace does not have to be morally bankrupt, however, for there to be a mismatch between its requirements and the values of an idealistic employee. We saw this, for example, in the case of an emergency medicine physician who chose to leave her job in a community hospital. She had previously spent a six-month deployment in an Afghanistan combat zone, which she described as her most fulfilling professional experience, despite the long hours and horrific injury cases. It was only when she came back to practice at the community hospital that she experienced burnout. The work felt meaningless, “rinse and repeat,” and she could barely get out of bed in the morning. “I was turned off by the extremely toxic environment and the corporatization of health care delivery.” She felt like a cog in a machine, whose only value to the hospital was to earn money—and that wasn't why she had gone into medicine. Eventually, she quit her job to work in the emergency room at a children's hospital where, despite a pay cut, she has more flexibility, fewer hours, and a work environment in which patient care is paramount. A key factor: Physicians are treated as valued professionals, she says, “not worker bees.”<sup>15</sup>

Most employees do their best work when they believe in what they are doing and their daily work nourishes their integrity, pride, and self-respect. When they feel they have morally capitulated to workplace values in conflict with their own, they often describe this as an “erosion of my soul”—a sense that they have actually lost some of their own integrity, dignity, spirit, and

will. When highly paid employees quit their jobs, even despite offers of more money or other benefits, it is this “soul erosion” that is pushing them away.

### Understanding Mismatches

These six areas of job-person match or mismatch are not independent of each other, but can overlap in multiple ways. For example, when overtime demands are not optional, a workload mismatch links to a control mismatch. When salaries are frozen but the boss’s favorite gets a bonus, a rewards mismatch is compounded by a fairness mismatch. Thus, there are many ways in which mismatches can combine. Meanwhile, the reciprocal interactions among coworkers over time mean that every individual can be affected by mismatches and also contribute to mismatches for others.

A way of thinking collectively about these six areas is to note that, together, they capture the three essential dimensions of a person’s relationship with their job. One of these is the *capability* dimension—and this is usually the first one that people think about (and sometimes the only one). It consists of the first two areas of job-person match discussed above: workload and control. Workload, again, refers to the degree of manageable demands and sufficient resources, while control refers to the degree of autonomy and opportunities for influence. But there are two other dimensions that are just as important, and sometimes even more salient to the risk of burnout. The *social* dimension consists of its own two areas of job-person match: reward and community. Recall that reward refers primarily to social recognition and positive feedback for a job well done, while community refers to the social culture of the workplace and the social relationships between the people who are employed there. Finally, the *moral* dimension consists of the last two areas: fairness and values. Fairness refers to the presence of respect and impartial processes in the workplace, while values are central to the meaning of one’s work and the integrity of the organization. Each of these dimensions of the person-job match deserves some focused discussion.

## THE CAPABILITY DIMENSION

This dimension is the one that most people think about when they think of burnout: “There is too much work for me to do, and I do not have enough say

in how I can do it well.” On the surface, burnout can seem like the simple outcome of heavy demands at work. People become exhausted from having too much to do. Although this captures some of what is happening, it misses a lot, as well. Sometimes people with the most tasks to accomplish in an organization are doing fine, while colleagues with smaller caseloads or less urgent demands feel distressed. There seems to be more going on than a straight line from heavy commitments to exhaustion. When asked whether more job demands lead to more distress, people have tended to answer, “It depends.”

The development of the Demand / Control model, a framework for analyzing risk of job stress, enabled important progress in figuring out what else was going on.<sup>16</sup> The model highlights the key importance of another variable: workers’ control over how their work is done. Situations with high demands and low control lead to distress. But situations with high demands and high control do not. People’s level of control at work can rise as they gain skills, strategies, help from others, autonomy, equipment, supplies, or any number of resources that help them manage the demands placed upon them. The model clarifies that the driver of distress is not so much workload per se, but *unmanageable* workload. The World Health Organization statement on burnout, with its reference to “stress that has not been successfully managed,” points directly to this juncture of workload and control.

Focusing on control as well as workload defines the challenge of preventing burnout as an organizational management issue rather than a personal health issue. Evidence that an employee is experiencing chronic stress should not always lead to a personal treatment plan. Instead, it should prompt efforts to develop more general strategies for improving workers’ relationships with the workplace. Certainly, urging employees to work harder does not constitute a meaningful or helpful response.

## **THE SOCIAL DIMENSION**

The quality of people’s connections with others in the workplace is critical to their sense of belonging to a good community. People function best when praise, comfort, achievement, help, humor, and happiness are shared with others they like and respect. When their job-related relationships are functioning well, employees benefit from a great deal of social support, have



effective means of working out disagreements or problems, readily exchange recognition and appreciation, and are more likely to experience engagement. In fact, being a valued member of a team is rewarding in itself, quite apart from the team's accomplishments. All of the social rewards and recognitions available at work depend on people to convey and share them.

By the same token, when workplace relationships function badly, the social atmosphere turns toxic, tainted by unresolved conflict, incivility, disrespect, hostility, social isolation, and even ostracism. That kind of work environment fosters greater distress among the workers, raising the risk of burnout. Although negative social encounters are not the only causal factor involved, promoting a more positive social environment can significantly improve people's experiences in the workplace.

Research on burnout has always recognized the central role for social relationships in the development and resolution of the syndrome. Initially, as research focused on burnout in various health and social service occupations, the emphasis was on the therapeutic relationship between the provider and the service recipient.<sup>17</sup> Over time, studies have confirmed that relationships with colleagues and supervisors are equally, if not more, relevant to a worker's potential to experience burnout. In a reciprocal way, workers experiencing burnout can have negative impacts on their colleagues, both by causing greater personal conflict and by disrupting job tasks. Thus, burnout can be "contagious," spreading and perpetuating itself through social interactions on the job.<sup>18</sup> Negative social interactions seem to drain people's energy and to distance them from their jobs, and the absence of positive social encounters is discouraging. Such findings suggest that burnout should be considered a characteristic of work groups, rather than simply an individual syndrome.

## **THE MORAL DIMENSION**

People do their best work when they believe in what they are doing and when they are being treated fairly. These considerations make up the moral dimension of the match between the job and the person. By moral, we mean what is good and ethical and fair. To say that someone has a strong moral character is to call that person a good member of society. When we talk about people of moral responsibility, we mean they reliably do the right

things—not just for some people, but for all those whose lives they impact. People who act with integrity are often described as having a moral compass, which guides them to know right from wrong and to proceed accordingly.

But what happens when good people are working in an environment that is not so good? Fairness plays a pivotal role in the moral domain, as workers constantly assess how they are being treated and how they see others being treated. Suppose there is a gap between what is preached and what is practiced, or when employees have to sacrifice the quality of their work to meet quantity targets? Suppose there are pressures to behave in unethical ways, or there is bias and discrimination against them?

In healthcare professions, there has been a longtime concern about *moral distress*—a response that arises when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action.<sup>19</sup> More recently, this phenomenon has been described as *moral injury* or *compassion fatigue*, both of which result when, say, hospital workers are torn between doing what they know is the right thing for patients and obeying efficiency-minded hospital rules. Or when first responders must deal with highly traumatic incidents without the resources they need to help victims.

The latter problem was pervasively felt during the Covid-19 pandemic, when communities everywhere faced shortages of personal protective equipment for healthcare workers, hospital beds, and vaccines. Pandemic responses in some places raise yet another ethical issue, which is “employee silence.”<sup>20</sup> In many occupations, including health care, pressure can be put on employees to keep quiet about any negative issues in the workplace, even when those involve hazardous, unethical, or illegal matters. Not only does an imposed norm of employee silence have bad effects on organizational performance, it takes a physical and psychological toll on the people who feel compelled to suppress their thoughts and emotions in the workplace.

The moral mismatch in such situations can be huge and can lead to the kind of soul erosion that is perhaps the epitome of full-blown burnout. Remember the emergency physician described above? Her experience of burnout was not so much a feeling of exhaustion or inefficacy. It arose from a mismatch in values, as she saw her life’s purpose as helping injured people, whether soldiers or children, and resented feeling that her efforts were being directed more toward making a bureaucratic institution more profitable. We

have seen such moral mismatches play out in other professions, as well. Always, they involve people questioning the value of what they are doing and the price it is exacting from them—as they trade health for wealth, for example. In one of the most famous verses of the Bible’s New Testament, Matthew 16:26, the question is posed: “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” In some cases, people decide to quit their jobs, and when they give notice they are offered larger salaries or other benefits to tempt them to stay. And for some of them, the response is, “No thanks, I would rather keep my soul.”

### Mismatches and the Canary

The conditions in burnout shops pose real hazards for the employees who work in them. Like coal mines where the air has turned toxic, these are environments that are unhealthy and unsafe. We see this in the six areas of mismatch, which represent the most dynamic points of connection or disconnection between people and their jobs. But if a workplace is a burnout shop, or turning into one, how can that be assessed? How can we determine when conditions are safe enough for human beings to spend their time working there?

The solution for the coal mine was to take a canary into a section where miners were working and pay attention to how well it functioned. Used as a kind of assessment tool, the bird would indicate if there were problems with the mine’s environment. It was just a single, individual canary, but its reaction to low oxygen in the air could be interpreted as evidence of what could happen to any other living creature that remained in the mine, too. In many of today’s workplaces, however, an individual worker’s distress is misinterpreted as a problem with that individual. Solutions are focused on fixing the worker rather than the workplace. As we will see in the next chapter, there is much more to learn from the individual worker—the canary in the burnout shop.

# 3

## Rethinking the Relationship between Person and Job

Where major advances in workplace well-being occur, they come through better workplace design, not through supplying organizations with tougher employees. When the canary begins to fade in the coal mine, the response is not to toughen up the bird, trying to make it more like a buzzard. It is to address the issues in the coal mine. In other work environments, too, we need to focus on the situations in which people work and make sure that surrounding job conditions support them in doing their jobs well.

We believe burnout is the result of a mismatch between employee and workplace. This understanding of the problem points to different solutions than the common, everyday advice to “increase your resilience”—which implies becoming more like the buzzard. A contrary view worth considering is that work is *not* fine. For many people, it places extraordinary demands on their time, energy, abilities, and emotional capacity. For many, it fails to fulfill their aspirations to do meaningful work, to be treated with respect, and to have their contributions genuinely recognized. Accordingly, having offered some ideas for the individual in [Chapter 2](#), our focus now shifts to improving the relationship between the person and the job. When conditions are pushing people toward full burnout syndrome, the answer is not more resilience. A dysfunctional workplace is not something for people to endure. It is something to change.

## Job-Person Match

Burnout is best conceptualized as a relationship problem—an issue with the fit, or match, between the person and the job. When there is a good match, the worker is likely to be engaged with the job and happy, energetic, confident, and ready to commit to a productive long-term relationship. But when there is a mismatch, the employee is more likely unhappy, exhausted, and cynical. A person in this situation may be unwilling to do more than the bare minimum, and ready to quit the relationship and leave for another job. In short, a worker experiencing a major mismatch is likely to experience burnout.

We should note that the basic concept of a job-person fit is not something new. It has been discussed since more than a century ago, when the rise of industrial engineering first focused managers on redesigning jobs for greater efficiency and selecting workers to fulfill the requirements of specific jobs. Those industrial engineering-minded managers essentially had two choices of how to achieve a good match, and the same two choices exist today: either fit the person to the job, or fit the job to the person.

The first approach, fitting the person to the job, starts from the position that the job in question has certain requirements—things to be done, and certain ways to do them—and then considers how a person should acquire and demonstrate the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet those. The main mechanism for bringing the person into alignment with the job is training in the specialized tasks it involves and the tools used to perform them. Yet jobs are not wholly defined by tasks—every job also has many other requirements, such as hours of work and people with whom the job-holder must interact—so there can be more to fitting people to jobs than just changing their skill sets. Helping people cope with other challenges of jobs represents a secondary strategy. Either way, however, whether training or coping is involved, the job is the “given” and the worker must be modified to fit it.

The second approach goes in the opposite direction, starting from the position that people require certain conditions to perform at their best and then asking how jobs can be reshaped to fit their needs. This means first considering human strengths and limitations, and then designing the job to work with the former and recognize the latter. We see this approach most

explicitly in the work of ergonomics specialists and “human factors” engineers, whose solutions begin with considerations of people’s physical and cognitive features. For example, if a person’s body is put under strain by the posture or motions required to perform a repetitive task, this can lead to a musculoskeletal disorder such as tension neck syndrome, a ruptured or herniated disc, tendonitis, or carpal tunnel syndrome. Such disorders are the biggest category of workplace injuries (and thus of workers’ compensation costs)—but they are preventable. Redesigning physical industrial and office equipment (such as chairs and workstations) so that the body is supported, rather than strained, produces a better job-person fit and reduces the risk of injury.

Likewise, with a better understanding of how people perceive and act on information (for example, how they notice warning signals and take corrective actions), engineers can redesign the information-processing equipment workers use. A prominent example of this is the redesign of airline cockpit displays to support better decision-making and reduce errors by pilots.

As established as the concept of job-person fit is, however, these examples point to a blind spot that existed for decades. Whether the approach was to fit the person to the job or the job to the person, the person was viewed as a set of physical or cognitive attributes. For a long time, that left a third and very important category of attributes out of the picture.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL FIT**

Recently, there has been a recognition that people’s *psychological* attributes, such as their motives and emotions, are also important factors in job-person matches and mismatches. In fact, this was noted by the pioneer of Total Quality Management, W. Edwards Deming. Warning against narrowly conceived reward systems in organizations, he wrote, “We must preserve the power of intrinsic motivation, dignity, cooperation, curiosity, joy in learning, that people are born with.”<sup>1</sup>

There is ample research showing that job stressors have negative impacts on psychological well-being, as well as on physical health. Studies have provided data on how people’s emotional responses and self-concepts affect how they cope with such stressors. Currently, the evidence points to the importance of certain fundamental psychological needs and desired

emotional states, and how the satisfaction of these is tied to improved personal and job outcomes. To be clear, these deep needs are not specific to people's relationships with their work; pursuit of them drives behaviors in all kinds of life settings, including home and the larger community. With the focus here, however, on the problem of burnout, these needs are highly significant to thinking about how to achieve a good match between the worker and the workplace.<sup>2</sup> Self-determination theory has identified that every person has key needs for autonomy, belongingness, and competence.<sup>3</sup> *Autonomy* refers to feeling ownership of one's own behavior and being able to act with a sense of volition and choice. Other words, such as personal control or independence, are also used to describe this need. In a work setting it is achieved when people feel they have appropriate say or discretion about how they carry out their job tasks. *Belongingness* refers to the basic human desire to achieve close relationships with other people and a sense of connection with them. Whether called by this name or using other terms such as affiliation or recognition, the need is for access to a positive and supportive social community. *Competence* refers to the desire to feel capable of meeting challenges, producing good outcomes, and learning things. One wants to be effective in accomplishing tasks and achieving goals. Together, the needs for autonomy, belongingness, and competence motivate people's behavior as they seek to grow and gain fulfillment.

Beyond these three fundamental pursuits that drive people's choices, there are four other significant psychological factors highly relevant to job-person match: these are the degrees to which people experience psychological safety, fairness, meaning, and positive emotions. *Psychological safety* refers to one's desire to be free of anxieties in contexts that may pose various social risks, such as being bullied, humiliated, or marginalized. Supporting this need in organizations may involve management policies and practices to protect people from harmful dynamics that would undermine trust and teamwork. *Fairness* refers to one's desire to be treated with respect and to know that any external decisions that affect one's life are unbiased and nondiscriminatory. At a group level, this can be discussed in terms of social justice. *Meaning* refers to one's desire to do things of value, which give purpose to one's life. Related terms here include personal growth and self-actualization, which focus more on achieving one's potential. Finally, by *positive emotions* we refer broadly to a range of pleasant feelings one wants to experience in life. A



related concept is the notion of psychological capital, which sees positive emotions—especially hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism—as a store of vital resources a person draws on and invests to accomplish things. Positive emotions have been linked to well-being and positive outcomes in organizations and are clearly part of a good match between worker and workplace.

All of these terms represent priorities for individuals in all spheres of their lives. In workplaces where people don't feel thwarted in their pursuits of autonomy, belongingness, and competence, and where they don't experience a lack of psychological safety, fairness, meaning, and positive emotions, their job performance and productivity is enhanced, along with their psychological well-being. Given the central importance of these factors to a person's experience of a job, they all represent good candidate targets for well-designed interventions to improve the job-person match.

### How a Person-Only Focus Undermines Problem-Solving

When things are not going well in a workplace, there tends to be a lot of finger-pointing and blaming of specific other people or groups. Put-downs such as “the workers don't have what it takes” or “the bosses don't know what they are doing” are all too common. While it may be easier to cast blame or responsibility on individuals, this limits what questions are asked and what answers are given. This person-only point of view is typically adopted regarding burnout, and also regarding its opposite, work engagement, which is often perceived solely as an individual inclination toward enthusiasm or commitment or especially “discretionary effort”—the observable choice of an employee to go above and beyond what a job formally requires.

This tendency to focus on the person rather than the situation turns out to be a basic feature of human perception and understanding. It has often been described in terms of *figure and ground*—meaning that a person's attention naturally focuses on a main object of interest, or figure, while relegating other parts of the scene to the background, or ground. For example, a statue in a museum gallery may be the figure, and the wall hung with art behind it may be the ground. The page you are reading is the figure, and the setting you are peripherally aware of beyond it is the ground. When a person catches our interest, we perceive that individual as the figure and the surrounding

situation as the ground. Moreover, the way we *think* about the person and the situation often reflects this figure-ground distinction.

Specifically, when we train our focus on a person as figure, rather than taking in the broader scene, we tend to make different causal attributions. Something has happened, in other words, and the mind is engaged in figuring out why it happened. If we have been focusing on a person as figure, our thinking is guided toward dispositional attributions—that is, seeing the event as the result of the individual’s own behavior, as driven by that person’s personality, intention, ability, intelligence, or other personal attributes. By contrast, bringing what was the “ground” into focus, thinking about the contextual elements that may constrain or trigger the individual’s behavior, leads to situational attributions. In this case we are inclined, perhaps, to blame the rainy weather and wet pavement for the person’s slip and fall, or the noisy children in the store for the clerk’s rudeness. The cause of the occurrence is located outside the individual’s person. Because humans have the tendency to focus on figures versus ground, and to cast other humans as figures, there is an inherent tendency to make more dispositional judgments than situational ones. This deeply ingrained cognitive bias has been called the *fundamental attribution error*.<sup>4</sup>

This error is common in workplaces. When there are problems, much more attention is focused on workers (as figures) and what is wrong with them than on the conditions of their jobs (the ground). In the case of burnout, this takes the form of people’s assuming, if a worker is experiencing burnout, that the cause can be found within that person. Perhaps there is something fundamentally wrong with the individual. The job is what it is, and the worker has the responsibility to adjust to its constraints and adhere to its rules. In short, a dispositional explanation puts the burden on the worker to achieve a better fit or match with the job.

Broadening the focus to include an emphasis on the job situation in which a person operates provides a better basis for understanding all the worker profiles outlined in [Chapter 2](#)—and for addressing the distressed ones defined there as the burnout, disengaged, overextended, and ineffective profiles. The factors that disrupt people’s relationships with their work are often situated in their work environments. Indeed, several contextual themes underlie virtually all descriptions of a distressed work experience. One ever-present theme is *imbalance*, often between high demands and low or inadequate resources.

Another is the *chronic nature* of job demands or stressors; unlike occasional crises, they are present on an ongoing basis. Another theme concerns *conflict*—whether between people on the job (clients, colleagues, or managers), or between the demands of various roles an individual plays, or between important values in some degree of tension.

Shifting focus from the individual to the situation can also bring to light other contextual factors that can disrupt a person's relationship with the job. Most notably, these have to do with the person's "nonwork life"—the realms of home, family and friends, leisure activities, second jobs, and more. A default to dispositional attributions puts the burden on people to figure out how to resolve any conflicts they may have with the standard demands of their jobs, but a situational viewpoint could point to other solutions, such as flexible work hours.

### **THREE ESSENTIAL SHIFTS FROM PERSON-ONLY**

If the hope is to go beyond coping strategies to preventive ones, then the way people have been considering the problem of burnout—the person-only framework we have been describing—must change in three important ways. First, it needs to shift from focusing on what may be wrong with the person and focus instead on what may be wrong in the relationship between the person and the *situation*. Whether at work or at home or in the community, the individual is always thinking and acting within a larger context.

This focus on the situation is especially important when considering demographic factors, such as a person's sex or ethnicity or age. Too often, if a question about the importance of such a factor is raised—for example, *Is burnout more of a problem for men or for women?*—people look for an answer in terms of differences *within* people. If the men in a population show less incidence, for example, people might conclude it's "because men are stronger and tougher." If the women prove more resistant to burnout, they might say that is "because women are more nurturant and sociable." Both explanations ignore situational circumstances that may do much more to distinguish men's and women's experiences. For example, if the great majority of certain especially burnout-prone roles in an organization are filled by men, or by women, then sex and job are confounded, and these variables cannot be easily untangled. But even when men and women occupying the

same job exhibit different patterns of burnout, it can still be true that situational factors are making their experiences different. In an early study of public service workers, for example, we found a clear pattern among holders of the same service representative job. The women were more satisfied than the men.<sup>5</sup> When we dug into why this was so, however, it turned out that the larger career path in which this job was situated was different for the women than the men. Most of the women, who lacked college degrees, experienced being promoted to the service representative position as a desirable, upward move that brought more prestige, better pay, and more job security than they had had before. Most of the men were in a different situation: they held college degrees and had accepted the service representative job only as an entry-level position from which they hoped to soon move on.

To look at the larger situational context of a job is to consider all the roles, groups, rules, and systems that shape the behavior of the people who work in that job. As an example, when we interviewed staff in one public service organization where burnout was a concern, we heard regular complaints about how supervisors responded to their efforts. As one person described it, “I never get positive feedback, no matter how well I do the job—it’s always, ‘Nice job, but ...’ and then some negative criticism. It can be demoralizing! I always hope that someday I will just hear ‘Nice job.’ Period. Just that, with no ‘but’ after it.” Later, however, when we interviewed the supervisors themselves, we learned that they had all been trained to give feedback in just that way: the model was to say something positive first, then follow it with a “negative” that could be improved. From their perspective they were adhering to what they were taught and doing their jobs well, and it was shocking to learn that the people reporting to them were unhappy and frustrated by the interactions.

All kinds of situational constraints on an individual worker’s behavior can raise or lower the potential of burnout, and these come into sharper focus when the emphasis is not on the person only, but on the relationship between the person and the job context. When, for example, are they supposed to arrive and leave a formal workplace? What tasks are they supposed to do? How must they do them, and by when? How are they expected to consult and communicate with others? Who has authority over whom? Are any deviations from or exceptions to the rules allowed in unusual circumstances? Who can make independent decisions of what kinds?

At the outset of this section we stated that three shifts are required to the person-only framework that people usually bring to burnout problems—and we have just argued for the biggest shift. The framework needs to shift from what may be wrong *with the person* to focus instead on what may be wrong *in the relationship between the person and the situation*. To introduce the second required shift, we should note the potential danger with the first. It would be a problem if, by framing burnout as a paired construction, we caused thinking about it to devolve into oppositional, “either-or” terms. If there is a mismatch, that is, which side of the equation is to blame? This kind of thinking still leads to a lot of finger-pointing, so another adjustment to the framework will be helpful in the search for viable solutions.

The second needed shift is to frame burnout in “both-and” terms. That is, *both* the individual *and* the context play roles in causing it and relieving it. It is the relationship between individual and context that is critical here, key to understanding burnout and figuring out what to do about it. What is causing people to be in sync with their jobs, or experiencing major disconnects? Which areas are likely to be the “trouble spots,” and which are likely to be sources of success and comfort? With the goal being to forge a good fit, or match, a focus on the relationship between the person and the job has the advantage of moving analysis beyond “either-or” finger-pointing to highlighting more of what is taking place within the job environment.

Finally, a third shift required to get to a good match is to focus more on what could be right, rather than simply on what is wrong. What might be a better way to assign job tasks, or to provide constructive feedback, or to improve team discussions? And once a good option has been identified, how can it be implemented successfully? There is a general tendency to focus on the negative—every hassle, every action that fails or goes wrong, every obstacle—and to complain about these and look for someone to blame. It may be easier to point out what’s wrong (and moan and groan about it) than it is to point out what would be right—but working to generate positive solutions is essential if things are going to be changed for the better.

### Essential Steps toward Good Matches

Across the years, as we have spoken with different occupational groups about burnout, we have routinely included a presentation about the six different

areas that can be drivers of burnout. These are the mismatches we already previewed in [Chapter 1](#): work overload, lack of control, insufficient rewards, breakdown of community, absence of fairness, and values conflicts. One recurring presentation we have done is an annual one with a group of PhD students in the physical sciences who have organized support groups to help them cope with the stresses of their laboratory training jobs. One time, a woman who had attended the talk a few years earlier came back and shared this story with us:

As I was growing up, I always knew I wanted to pursue a career in science, so when I was accepted into the graduate program and assigned to a prestigious lab, I was in heaven! But the lab turned out to be a hellish experience for me—it was difficult to deal with the other lab students, the supervisors, and the professor in charge. I was not successful in my work, and I couldn't turn things around. So I was facing a crisis moment of “maybe I am not actually good enough to work in this field.” I was thinking that I would have to quit the program and give up my dream, because I was a failure and not cut out for this kind of career.

And then I attended your talk four years ago and heard about the six areas—and I was going down the list, saying, “Check, I have work overload ... check, it's a socially toxic community ... yes, check unfairness, too”—and suddenly I realized that *all six* of them were big mismatches for me. And then I had that light bulb moment: “It's not that I'm not good enough—I am in the wrong lab!”

So, I worked with an adviser to get out of the lab I was in and switch to another lab—not an easy thing to do, but I persisted—and eventually I got a new position in this other lab. And that lab job turned out to be a great match for me. I have been able to do good work, and I have become a coauthor on some scientific articles, and now I am out on the job market and have already gotten invited for some job interviews! Understanding what was going on in the six areas really changed my perspective on what was going wrong—and it wasn't just about me.

In the same way, many people find it helpful to use the six dimensions of job-person match to assess their employment situations. Doing so clarifies

what is and is not working well in their own circumstances. In this woman's case, the conclusion was that there was so much wrong with the match that her best option was to leave her job and seek a better alternative. But often, the problems employees face are not so pervasive, and it is possible to identify changes that could be made within specific areas to improve the job context and make the workplace one in which they can thrive.

Recall that part of the World Health Organization's statement on burnout, quoted in the introduction, is that it results "from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed." From that management perspective, making progress is a matter of taking a set of basic steps. As we will explain more fully below, the first is to zero in on a target area, based on a positive orientation to achieving a better match, and the subsequent steps are to set an attainable goal, redesign to achieve a better match, outline a plan to make the change happen, and make use of effective practices. All of these steps should be approached collaboratively, with a bias toward customized approaches, and with unwavering commitment to building engagement.

## **PIVOT TO CONSIDER POSITIVE MATCHES**

The first essential step toward a better job-person match is to focus on an area where there is clear potential for improvement—knowing that there are many types of chronic stressors that could be better managed, and therefore many choices that could be made. To make the right choice, the fundamental first move should be to pivot to a positive orientation. Each of the six areas of mismatch we presented in [Chapter 1](#) can be seen as the worst case in a wide range of possibilities, and each has its opposite at the positive end of the spectrum. An ideal job-person match, therefore, would feature these six positive conditions:

- Sustainable workload





- Ample choice and control



- Gratifying recognition and rewards



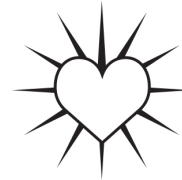
- Supportive work community



- Norms of fairness, respect, and social justice



- Well-aligned values and meaningful work



By focusing on the positive endpoints, it is possible to find the targets with biggest potential to improve job-person matches. Meanwhile, dividing the opportunity into six lines of consideration offers other benefits. It means that many possible reasons for the problem will surface and many possible options for improvement will be generated. It helps to head off any temptation to seek a standard, universal recipe; looking at the opportunity from different angles makes it clearer that every organization and group of workers represents a unique mix of these six areas and calls for a tailored solution. It also facilitates collaborative thinking about solutions to focus on these areas specifically. For example, if the focus is not broadly on burnout or engagement but more narrowly on workload, people can trade ideas with greater shared clarity: “What if we change our workflow in this certain way, to even out the cycles of intense effort and downtime? Could that get us to a more sustainable workload?” Or, if the discussion is centered on recognition and rewards: “The all-staff picnic has been a traditional way the company expresses appreciation for everyone’s contributions. What would be some other ways to do that?”

Perhaps most valuable of all, starting the search for targets by assessing all six areas provokes thinking in unaccustomed ways about problems and solutions. These multiple perspectives help “break set”—that is, allow people to break away from set patterns of thinking to question their implicit assumptions, ingrained operating procedures, and “same old, same old” practices that have not worked. For example, in one case we will discuss in [Chapter 8](#), a CEO first assumed that, to the extent that employees were burned out, it must be a problem of workload or rewards. It turned out to be one of *fairness*. Even after that discovery challenged his instincts, he stuck to a further assumption that perceptions of unfairness could be fixed by more money. They could not—because the problem was not about uneven rewards, it was about arbitrary practices.

With a positive orientation toward change and any of the six desired matches in focus, there are many ways to generate alternative ideas for achieving the goal. Our recommendation is to recognize the role of the core psychological needs just discussed in people’s well-being and work motivation, and use these as guides for redesigning job tasks and organizational processes in ways that will provide better job-person matches.

So how do we do this? Having articulated these deep psychological needs, how do we figure out practical ways to satisfy one or more of them on the job? At first glance, the task may not seem as intuitive as figuring out how to meet physical needs—for example, by redesigning a chair that provides greater support and comfort. The two are more similar, however, than one might think. The trick is to get information from people about the conditions that satisfy a particular need. For example, just as they might tell you they felt most comfortable in a chair they could adjust to their height and workstation setup, they can tell you that their most satisfying level of autonomy in a job was when they exercised a certain level of discretion regarding how they went about doing what they needed to accomplish.

A useful procedure for gaining these insights is the *critical incident technique*.<sup>6</sup> In formal social science research, this long-established method gathers input from study participants by asking them to recall and tell about a time they experienced the phenomenon in question. What happened, and what was the outcome? Applied to job-person matches and mismatches, this can take the form of asking employees to consider a certain core psychological need and to share an anecdotal account of a time when it was

especially supported (or thwarted) in their work experience. For instance: “Please describe a specific work situation where you felt you were treated with great *fairness*.” Replies are guided to include the background and setting of the story (where it happened, who was present, what was the situation); the behaviors that occurred in the situation (the teller’s own behaviors, others’ behaviors, organizational or environmental events); the immediate outcomes of those behaviors or changes (the direct responses made by the employee and others, and how they represented a change in perception or cognition); and the longer-term consequences or personal outcomes caused by the incident (for both the organization and the employee, perhaps as it altered their subsequent decision-making).

What is important to note here is that, while information is being gathered from individuals, the objective is to aggregate what is learned to identify shared job solutions, not just to know individual preferences. Once multiple critical incidents have been collected from a group of employees (perhaps a team, unit, or cohort holding the same job title) these accounts can be combined into an overall picture of key themes of need satisfaction and workplace characteristics associated with those needs. The results can then be shared with the employees in a next phase of asking them to generate ideas about improvements that might increase the frequency of such positive experiences of need satisfaction on the job.

It is important that the individuals sharing critical incidents or otherwise reporting their own experiences know that the information they provide is not being used to diagnose or fix their particular cases, but rather to help shape job modifications for the benefit of many workers. It would be unfortunate if a one-on-one interview technique reinforced the impression that burnout is a problem of the individual and left people asking, “What can I do about it?” The process of addressing burnout, and working toward better job-person matches, should feel like a “we” effort, not a “me” one.

## **SET ATTAINABLE GOALS**

With the focus trained on an area with high potential for positive change, and ideas for improvement already generated, the challenge arises of how to choose which ideas to pursue and in what order. As in other realms, the

vision of the future must be translated into an initial change strategy. It matters how you start.

One important criterion is, of course, that the first change should be something meaningful—in an area people really care about. At the same time, it should represent a “doable” change, with good prospects for successful implementation in the near term. It is always a challenge to change something that has become established in an organization. It takes time and effort and there are glitches and course corrections along the way. But it is especially important for people to see the first steps of a long-term initiative working out successfully. Early victories are cause for celebration, provide motivation to take on more challenging changes, and build hope for a better future.

An attainable goal typically implies small changes rather than big ones. By “small” we do not mean trivial or silly or inconsequential. Any stressor that persistently irritates workers is certainly a candidate for a meaningful fix, and if that fix is within reach, it may well rise to the top of the to-do list. A minor stressor can act like a pebble in one’s shoe. The pain and frustration it causes may be low-level, but it is constant—and it’s a great relief when it is lessened or eliminated. If employees could choose the top five “pebbles” in their jobs, which ones would be on everyone’s list?

Often, the temptation is to take aim first at other kinds of stressors: the big boulders compared to those small pebbles. Projects targeted at these not only engage with critical and highly meaningful issues but offer the potential for transformational effects. (An example is the values clarification process we will describe in [Chapter 9](#).) But a boulder of a problem can also be so big and complex that it is hard to get one’s arms around, and thus a project can be less sure to succeed or take much longer to yield results. Before tackling these very challenging areas, it may be wise to establish a viable process for making change by working on more attainable goals.

## **REDESIGN FOR A BETTER MATCH**

Once a positive, attainable goal has been chosen, the change strategy needs to develop a good solution for achieving it. In some cases, that may entail a straightforward investment, such as in better equipment and supplies. If people want less of their time to be wasted by a nonworking printer, for

example, the answer can be as simple as a newer machine and larger stock of paper. But often, another solution is possible, too. Maybe it becomes part of someone's role to keep the printer in good working order, or the process the whole team follows is changed to deliver more documents electronically. Later, in [Chapter 10](#), we will discuss solution design more thoroughly, but a few key principles of redesign should be mentioned here, as part of any change strategy.

One principle is that the best solutions emerge from consideration of many solutions. The idea is to generate multiple potential solutions, and then assess the pros and cons of each of them. For every answer proposed to *What could we do?* there should be multiple follow-on questions: Why would that be better than other alternatives? What are the costs or trade-offs? How does this actually improve the fit on this area, in terms of control, community, fairness, and more?

Another principle is that effective solutions serve key psychological needs. Part of the consideration of alternative change ideas should be an explicit effort to identify what key psychological needs might be involved, and how these could inform any redesigns. For example, a solution might be suggested to resolve a problem of unfairness, such as favoritism. How does that solution connect to the need for psychological safety? Or there might be an idea for improving the social climate in a work community. It would serve people's need for belongingness, but could it do more by also responding to their need for meaning?

A third principle is the often neglected one of *subtraction*—if tasks and responsibilities are being added to a job, then some other things need to be taken away. What tasks are no longer necessary and can simply be deleted? Can some tasks be redesigned or reformatted to be done more easily and quickly, thus subtracting unnecessary time and effort? Or can a time-consuming task be shifted to someone else—and if so, what can be taken off *their* plate? Many overloaded jobs are the result of steady accretion over the years—things keep getting added to the work people are already doing, and rarely does anything get removed. Even more rare is a substantial review of organizational procedures and redesign of processes (a sort of major spring cleaning). Occasionally, managers should step back and reassess: “Given how we operate now, with our resources and technology, how could we design a better workflow for the important things we do?”

## MAKE THE CHANGE HAPPEN

To bring about a desired change, it is not enough to simply announce that “from now on, we’re going to do things this way.” It has to be a collective enterprise, with everyone on board and willing to give up something familiar (even if it is disliked) for something new and hopefully better. The implementation process needs to be well planned, and it needs to specify milestones of progress. What will it take to make this work, and how will we know that we remain on track? In the end, what will success look like?

Again, meaningful change does not happen overnight. A realistic plan factors in the time it will take to shed old ways of doing things and learn new ones, to reach the point where they are automatic, to deal with unexpected bugs and hiccups, and to tweak things until they are right. It is important to keep regular progress reports on the agenda, to celebrate small wins and good revisions. And when the goal has been accomplished satisfactorily, celebrate that, too—and share it with others who could benefit from it.

## COLLABORATE, CUSTOMIZE, COMMIT

In [Part III](#) of this book, where the discussion moves to practical challenges in creating better job-person matches and making them work, we will delve further into key change practices that employers can employ. Because the success of any change, large or small, depends on employee buy-in and willingness to make it work, those driving changes in workplaces should keep in mind these three Cs: collaborate, customize, and commit.

By *collaborate*, we mean that managers in organizations should not act unilaterally on their own conclusions as to what would help. They should ask employees to be a part of making things better. Ask for ideas and feedback on various alternatives, and then listen to what people contribute. If employees do not see the potential benefit of a proposed change, it will not happen.

Also important is being willing and able to *customize*. This is particularly true of “best practices” observed to be working in other organizations. In reality, it is never true that one size fits all, and there must be thoughtful adaptation of proposed changes to each local culture and type of occupation. Encouraging creative modifications also helps a solution become more accepted, because it is “ours.”

Organizations must also be prepared to *commit*. Achieving positive improvements will require sustained effort, with cycles of making positive interventions, evaluating their results, and proceeding with further modifications. Work toward creating better job-person matches may not succeed at first, but it is important that the people of the organization keep on trying until they get it right.

### Why Matches Matter

The author of *The Happiness Track* recounts a youthful experience she had, working as an intern at an international newspaper in Paris, France. Her summer job had her frequently delivering messages and documents between two parts of the building: the floor where the writers and editors were preparing the written content for the next morning's edition, and the basement where the press workers would print it before dawn. Although both groups worked under the same daily deadline pressure, their two work environments were starkly different, not only in terms of the tasks to be done and the people doing them, but in the workplace climate. On the writers' floor the atmosphere was tense as people hunched anxiously over computer keyboards, eating at their desks and generally keeping to their cubicles. The printing room was noisy and festive, with people joking and laughing with each other, and a spread laid out on a table of French bread, cheese, and wine. Not surprisingly, the intern always felt better on entering the printing room, leading her later to write, "I believe most of us want to be like the French press workers: we want to do a good job—and we want to enjoy doing it."<sup>7</sup>

Doing a good job and feeling good about doing it—this is a great way of expressing the core goal of promoting a good job-person match. The six areas of mismatch matter because they resonate with the psychological needs and states identified in this chapter. A basic approach to improving the relationships of people with their workplaces starts with finding out which of these domains are working well for people, which are presenting problems, and to what degree those represent intractable problems in their quests for fulfillment.

As we move into the six chapters that make up [Part II](#) of this book, we pivot to the positive, examining actual settings in which organizations



rethought problems, designed solutions, and allowed changes for the better to emerge. And as each chapter puts the spotlight on a different area—workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values—the bigger message will become clear: there are many kinds of positive job-person matches that can be made, and many different paths to achieving them.

# 5

## Control



More than fifty years ago, the idea was developed that managers take very different approaches to their employees based on which of two basic theories of human motivation they subscribe to—“Theory X” or “Theory Y.” Managers who operate by Theory X hold a more negative view of workers, assuming that they don’t have much ambition, cannot handle responsibilities, are lazy, and are only doing the job to earn money. They assume that workers are mostly self-interested and not motivated to perform beyond the minimum level required to keep their jobs. These Theory X assumptions lead managers to a hands-on approach of close supervision, because they don’t trust the workers to do a good job. Determined to exercise tight control, they are on the lookout for mistakes and quick to penalize them. In contrast, managers who operate by Theory Y have a more positive view of workers, assuming that they are intrinsically motivated by the work and will embrace the responsibility to do the job well. In this case, managers check in with workers but don’t feel the need to supervise them strictly. They allow them more autonomy in completing tasks, and they tend to relate to workers in a more personal, teaching-based manner. The particulars of these two management styles may differ by the type of occupation or work product, and by the manager’s personality, but in general the Theory X style is more associated with worker burnout.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, we move into the second area of job-person matches and mismatches: the degree to which workers feel a sense of *control*, can act with *autonomy*, and are granted *flexibility*.

## Control

Very few workplaces, of course, operate as democracies in which everyone has an equal voice in consequential decisions. In almost all of them, employers hold substantially more power than employees. The owners, CEOs, middle managers, and supervisors who constitute the chain of command get to determine who does what and when, and how they should do whatever that may be. Their authority is legitimized by the governance structure of the organization. So any attempt by a worker to gain more control does not start on a level playing field. Yet employers also have the prerogative to allocate more authority further down the line. The question, then, is how much have they allocated to workers in a given job? What latitude do individuals have to accomplish objectives in the way they think best?

Frustration with having insufficient control over one's work is an important indication of a job-person mismatch. People want the opportunity to make choices and decisions, to use their ability and training to think and to solve problems, and to have some input in the process of achieving the outcomes for which they will be held accountable. Lack of control is often a more serious issue for workers than workload per se. It can easily lead to a sense of inefficacy and cynicism about both the adequacy of job processes and the ultimate value of one's work output. Stated in more positive terms, when employees do perceive that they can exercise professional judgment, and have access to the resources necessary to do their work well, they are more likely to experience engagement. There is a world of difference between personal accountability and forced adherence to rigid policies and tight monitoring.

Policies that impose narrow constraints on how work is done—cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all processes to be followed—allow no room for judgment or innovation and leave workers feeling less responsible for their outcomes, not more. Mechanical management leads to mechanical performance. Similarly, close monitoring of staff performance has human costs beyond the supervisors' time and energies, in that it diminishes the

capacity of employees to adapt and take initiative when that is required. This style of supervision sends the demeaning message that “you can’t be trusted.” It says that management doesn’t respect your judgment, or doesn’t consider you very smart, or doesn’t believe you will stay on task.

When greater control is allocated to individuals in workplaces, it’s because managers are satisfied on two points of consideration: productivity and trust. They need to know, first, that people are willing and able to produce sufficient output before they will grant them greater discretion over where, when, and how they work. Beyond worrying about productivity suffering, they also want assurance that allocating more authority to workers will not open the door to bad behaviors. They may suspect that, with greater discretion, workers will start cutting corners on quality, or undermining the efforts of colleagues they dislike, or diverting resources away from workplace priorities. No one would deny that problems can occur when managers delegate and disappear. The challenge is finding the right balance between abdicating managerial responsibility and insisting on making all decisions.

When the Covid-19 pandemic abruptly shifted businesses and other organizations around the world to work-from-home arrangements, many employees gained a sense of control they had never experienced before in their workplaces. And research shows that, despite the anxieties and challenges of the time, productivity rose under the remote-work conditions.<sup>2</sup> The prospect began to be widely discussed that many employers might never go back to their pre-pandemic insistence that workers be physically present in office buildings. For managers disinclined to cede control, that would not be a welcome development.

A hint of this attitude comes through in a *Washington Post* guest editorial authored by the chief executive of Washingtonian Media, which publishes the city-focused magazine *The Washingtonian*.<sup>3</sup> The gist of the op-ed was that employees should understand, if remote-work arrangements became the norm for many of them, their organizations would be much worse off—and if performance declined they would be pushed toward cost-cutting. The CEO extolled the value of spontaneous conversations, mentoring of younger staff, and workplace “citizenship behaviors”—all the informal acts by which people contribute to an organization’s smooth functioning beyond the strict fulfillment of their job requirements. But despite the general tone of employee appreciation, she chose to end the piece on an ominous note: “So

although there might be some pains and anxiety going back into the office, the biggest benefit for workers may be simple job security. Remember something every manager knows: The hardest people to let go are the ones you know.”

Employees of *The Washingtonian* reacted immediately to what could be read as a message to them: Get back to your desks or you’re fired. It didn’t help that the headline originally used for the piece was “As a CEO, I Want My Employees to Understand the Risks of Not Returning to Work in the Office.” The following morning, more than a dozen of them tweeted: “As members of the Washingtonian editorial staff, we want our CEO to understand the risks of not valuing our labor. We are dismayed by CM’s public threat to our livelihoods. We will not be publishing today.”<sup>4</sup> The CEO hastened to assure them that she intended no such threat. But that final line was at least a frank reminder of who in an organization has most control over people’s work: the manager with the power to end their employment.

If bosses make broad statements about subjects as important as people’s need for control over their lives, then those bosses should know that their own employees will be sensitive to the message. As a parallel, in our own work as university professors, we learned long ago not to make jokes about how grades are determined. For students, grades are serious business—a consequential area where someone else’s extreme power diminishes their own control over outcomes. They are not a joking matter—no more than job security is.

### Autonomy

The importance of personal autonomy cannot be overstated. Having the sense of being able to make one’s own choices based on one’s own beliefs and priorities is at the core of human dignity. The word *autonomy* is Latin for *self-rule* and can apply at many levels—from countries and regions to organizations, teams, and individuals. At the personal level, it can refer to the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own informed decisions in any domain of life. In workplaces, it means feeling capable of doing a good job and being able to take action as needed to correct things that go wrong and adjust to changing circumstances. This does not imply that people prefer working entirely by themselves, believe they should make

decisions in isolation of others working in the same context, or are resistant to feedback. Rather, it means they want to operate with an amount of discretion and responsibility that recognizes their capability.

There are many ways in which people can gain and sustain personal autonomy in the workplace. Obviously, a first step involves training processes and the successful attainment of relevant skills as measured by certain standards. But once that fundamental capability has been established, what else is required for a worker to step up to making informed suggestions or criticisms, or pursuing independent innovations, or taking on new responsibilities? Regular and open dialogues among employees and team members and managers are critical for enhancing a sense of job autonomy and job satisfaction for everyone. Such dialogues have to be mutual, two-way conversations, in which everyone has opportunities to ask questions or suggest answers—so a shared sense of psychological safety is also necessary. Managers can do several things to enhance employees' autonomy and control, such as clarify expectations, ask for ideas about what could be improved or fixed, and agree to advocate for needed resources or procedural changes.

In some cases, people may be well trained and highly motivated, but chronic obstacles may still make it difficult for them to work with autonomy in the jobs they are qualified to do. A roadblock may be internal or external, but if the effect is to erode the control that people have over their job, it threatens both the integrity of their work and the pride they take in it.

As a prime example, consider the rules and regulations that have been established in many professions to ensure certain positive outcomes or to prevent negative ones. These can also become frustrating sources of delay and difficulty: they don't always apply to the situations workers face, and they can slow down or reduce the achievement of required outcomes. For healthcare employees, for example, working with medical insurance regulations is a major source of stress. We've heard them complain that "this stuff interferes with my ability to provide treatment," citing time wasted on excessive prior-authorization processes and denials of standard-of-care practices. Also typical was the resentment voiced that "some reviewer in some company who doesn't know the client and who has less training than I do decides how many therapy sessions the client can get from me." This isn't just an irritating setback. The real problem is the therapist's feeling that "I no longer have control over the type and quality of care I provide." Such issues

are far beyond the power of individual workers to change, but senior leadership across many parallel institutions could organize to challenge and modify these larger barriers.

Perhaps most often, control mismatches flare up within supervisory relationships. When things are going well, supervisors allocate autonomy and discretion to employees whom they trust. That is, supervisors give more latitude to employees in whom they have confidence regarding their abilities and willingness to pursue workplace priorities. When trust is lacking, they monitor employees' decisions more closely.

In some settings, the latitude supervisors can give to their employees is constrained by policies or contract provisions. The supervisors lack the authority to allocate autonomy to individual employees or to work groups on definitive actions such as closing sales, selecting treatments, or developing curriculum elements. An important step toward reducing mismatches is locating the problem. Is it in the supervisory relationship itself, or further up the line in workplace policy?

The varying power that supervisors exercise in allocating autonomy was on full display in 2021, as Covid-19 infection rates began to drop and pandemic controls were relaxed. Many people who had found working from home to be more productive saw the transition as an opportunity to negotiate their ideal balance of on-site and remote work. For some, the modifications that could be made turned out to be dictated by global workplace policies. Others could negotiate workable solutions tailored to their unique job requirements and teamwork expectations, and the authority to bless any modified work arrangements lay with their immediate supervisors.

Either condition can lead to a better match on autonomy, but the routes toward it differ. When supervisors have discretion, the path to resolving mismatches can be simpler and quicker. On the other hand, a personal process with an immediate supervisor is prone to break down when there is mistrust or animosity in the supervisory relationship. Meanwhile, anyone who has been involved in developing workplace policies knows it can be a slow and complex process. The latter route has an advantage, however, in that policy resolutions, once enacted, apply broadly and instantly.

A technology innovation firm was undergoing a major transition as a result of growth based on financial success. The employees were dedicated to their work and to the company but were experiencing serious frustration in the



projects they undertook. The survey assessment revealed that the most common result was for employees to fall into the ineffective profile (because their most negative scores were in professional inefficacy). Although their dedication to the organization was evident in the strong match on values, there was a serious mismatch on control (and to a lesser extent, both reward and fairness). Employees' ratings were critical of the supervision they were receiving (which connected to their issues with control and autonomy) and indicated that they saw things overall as changing for the worse.

The written comments on the survey confirmed a general view that the root of the problem was the imposition of central management controls as the company had grown. The CEO, a dynamic and inspirational leader, had developed the company based on autonomous project teams that worked a new idea through the concept phase, the development of investment funds, and the prototype process to the point that it was ready for production. The CEO managed the complex work of the organization through direct interactions with team leaders. Based on quick weekly meetings, he would update the project management documents on the computer. With this framework the company successfully took several projects to market and built a group of dedicated and capable employees.

But with the growth of the company, the scope of projects exceeded this personal level of management. The board of the company brought in a management consulting firm to establish management control and accounting procedures to keep systematic track of a wide variety of projects dispersed over the various sites where the company did its work. The systems were effective in tracking the important business information, but they placed constraints on employees while increasing their paperwork.

Thus, the procedures that were supposed to make things better were actually generating a serious mismatch between the level of control that employees had and what they wanted. To deal with this mismatch, the company established an in-house task force on management systems to study the growing literature on management transitions in quickly growing companies. The task force provided senior management with contact information on major consultants in this field. Their recommendation was that the company embark on a collaborative process aimed at developing a workable management system that would result in an integrated, successful

corporation supporting the innovative initiatives of the employees. This solution offered the autonomy employees desired.

### Flexibility

A key principle for enhancing a better job-person match in control is flexibility. There are several meanings of this term, all of which are highly relevant. First, flexibility refers to the quality of bending easily without breaking. This stands in contrast to the basic engineering concepts of both stress (the force experienced by an object which causes a change in it) and stress tests (the conditions under which the object will ultimately break). These engineering concepts are usually applied to technology or infrastructure (such as bridges or power grids), but the parallel to the human body has been instructive. Conditions that allow people to bend and withstand stressors, rather than break in terms of poor health and well-being, are worth pursuing. Indeed, that is the basic rationale underlying the notion of a better match or fit between the job and the person.

Second, flexibility refers to the ability to be easily modified. This means that some things are not static and permanent but can be changed and revised; people can choose to do things differently. When workers can get out of a rut or can modify the “same old, same old” routine, they are able to exercise some autonomy and feel more in control of their jobs. Sometimes major tasks can be done differently, such as developing a new sales pitch, but even more ordinary everyday tasks can be handled in new ways, such as responding to email requests, or greeting customers, or writing the opening paragraph of a report. Such modifications can be an ongoing process, and individual workers can often do them on their own. By reevaluating the many aspects of their job and focusing on those where they have some choice and discretion, they can then modify, vary, shift, or reorganize how they handle their workday.

Third, flexibility refers to the willingness to change or compromise. This means that everyone—workers, teams, management—is ready and prepared to seek better solutions than the ones that already exist. Usually this requires joint efforts between these various groups to determine better ways in which the work will get done.

Increasingly, flexibility has become a necessity for employees in today's workforce, as they try to balance their jobs with the needs of their nonwork lives. Some of those needs may be fixed (children's school hours do not match those of the workplace), but others may be random or unexpected (a health problem requires seeing a doctor). The importance of flexible work options became even more apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic, when many office jobs had to be done from home, and the usual hours and operating procedures changed. People came up with new ways of doing their jobs, which may help them work better in the post-pandemic era. Remote work is likely to continue in the future, so companies might accommodate a broader mix of people being off-site going forward. Also, some of the tasks that did not get done during shutdowns may not need to be done at all (remember the subtraction of clutter?). Workplaces will have to evolve in additional ways to ensure that they are safe and healthy environments (whether physical or virtual) in which people do their jobs. All of this means that flexibility is going to continue to be a key factor in achieving good job-person matches in the future world of work.

An example of a workplace that offered a bit more flexibility was a hospital that had conducted a survey of physicians to identify key risk factors for burnout. Several interesting findings from this effort prompted new ideas about possible corrective actions. The most intriguing result, however, was a discrepancy between responses in the area of control. Almost all of the physicians reported negative scores of mismatch on this dimension—but one subgroup of specialists did not. Instead, its members reported positive scores on control. What was going on with them? Through follow-up discussions it was discovered that this subgroup used a different system for scheduling, which generated a work schedule for each doctor but then allowed the recipients to accept or refuse what was offered to them. The central system used by the rest of the subgroups allowed for no such pushback—its communication was more like “here's your schedule; get on with it.” This one feature was the key to turning a mismatch into a match: the doctors who could interact with their scheduling system and make a change said this extra bit of control gave them much-needed latitude as they juggled demands of work life and personal life.

It turned out that this scheduling system could work well for other specialties but that it would require the hospital to devote staff time to

scheduling, to accommodate the dialogue that followed a physician refusing the initial schedule. The payoff for that additional staffing investment would be a greater sense of control and fewer indicators of burnout for the physicians. With doctors being the highest-paid professionals and the costliest to recruit, the math worked out in favor of increasing the resources devoted to scheduling. However, the fact that a system could be redesigned to make an actual positive difference opened everybody's thinking about addressing control issues. The success of the different system was a concrete example of "it can be done"—and helped stimulate some other suggestions for improving the scheduling process.

## **TENTATIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

It is important to acknowledge another aspect of workplaces in the twenty-first century: the relationship of people with workplaces has become increasingly tentative.<sup>5</sup> A "job for life" has become an outmoded concept in much of the world, employer-based pensions have faded,<sup>6</sup> and workplaces shift their liabilities toward individual employees. As a result, people need to attend to managing their current job in the context of their career. A long-term perspective has benefits, but it introduces uncertainty. In addition to control problems within their job, people contend with challenges to exercising control over their future careers.

The twenty-first century has a tentative quality to it, promoting background anxiety. It is a world of disposable items. Many items are not repairable, and if they are, the repairs would cost more than buying a replacement item. It is better to throw them away when they stop working so well. Much of what previously were considered permanent items—books, music, pictures—are now ethereal patterns of electronic data. Applications that were previously owned turned into subscriptions. Things are not only less concrete, but they also prompt less commitment.

When people have a more tentative relationship with their job, it goes against their developing a sense of control of their work. People become more cautious. They have fewer options for participating in major developments at a workplace. In short, it is difficult to exercise control in a relationship without confidence that the relationship will continue.

With the acknowledgment of this reality in the workplace, we must remember that the control area of work life has a foundational role in the relationships people develop with their job. Greater control increases the potential for developing good matches with other areas of work life. The capacity to make decisions regarding tasks, access to resources, and team membership has implications for managing workload, finding a compatible community, and emphasizing valued activities. With the capacity to participate in decisions or to make choices, people can adjust to whatever comes their way. Employees are also more likely to stay in their jobs when they have autonomy and flexibility.

Supervisor relationships have a pivotal role in determining employees' possibilities for fulfilling matches at work. Policies that allocate authority to supervisors allow them to accommodate a variety of working styles and preferences. In the context of responsive relationships between supervisors and employees, people can resolve issues promptly in ways that recognize diverse perspectives on the strains and opportunities that shape life at work. Smooth and ongoing communication from supervisors with managers helps to maintain unity and purpose in the workplace. Supervisors need to know that management backs the choices they make in developing their work groups.

The supervisory relationship is not only central to autonomy and control. As we will see in [Chapter 6](#), it also has much to do with achieving a good match regarding rewards. In fact, rewards are a means of controlling what people do at work, even if, as positive incentives, they have an upside to them. But the effects of rewards are also complicated by their pervasive nature, in that they don't only come from people in positions of greater authority. As the next chapter reveals, the most meaningful forms of recognition may come from peers or from the work itself.