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# Terms of Engagement

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I can't imagine being in the library profession 20 years, 25 years, or even 30 or more—and still liking it? How do people last? At any stage in a career, especially one where rapid change is endemic, individuals can experience burnout. Those classic signs: emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion, which characterize burnout, can happen at different phases or stages of a library career and for a variety of reasons. Perhaps our high expectations have not been met. Perhaps the organization in which we work has become overly bureaucratized, is stagnant or lacks vision, or has an organizational climate of conflict and blame, and is continually “doing more with less.” Perhaps there is too much new to learn and one's competence feels threatened, or there isn't enough room to learn and grow so frustration or boredom sets in. Recognize any of these?

So, why do people stay in this profession a long time and how do they manage

to avoid burnout? As Donna Millard found in her survey of academic librarians, we stay in the profession because “We like what we do. Our Career Commitment is very high...” Millard used Blau's definition of “career commitment” as “one's attitude towards one's profession or vocation,” aspects of career enjoyment, accomplishments, challenge, creativity, collegiality, and participation in professional activities.

It is true there are individuals who become disenchanted and move on. Their “fit” with the values and actual work are not right for them, or their imaginations have been captured by the ideals or action in another career. For those who do stay in librarianship (or any other profession), there are two major avenues to work-life burnout. It's helpful to distinguish between them. For the sake of discussion, I'll call them the situational and professional engagement; one is about the environment in which we do our work, and the other is the nature of and our relationship to the work. Yes, the two are intertwined, and one certainly does affect the other, but considering them separately can inform how we might approach our own professional future.

The situational is the one associated with the organization in which we work. Leiter and Maslach describe six areas in which the nature of the job is not aligned with that of the people, and thus are elements in work-place burnout. We are familiar with these to a lesser or greater extent: a) workload; b) control over one's work; c) reward, both the external ones of salary and benefits, and the intrinsic or internal ones of satisfaction in doing something of importance and doing it well; d) community where there is shared praise, humor, social support, etc.; e) fairness which communicates respect and confirms individuals' value or self-worth; and f) values where the requirements of the job and the employee's



Deborah Dancik



personal principles need to have congruency. Of course, good management practices are the key to good organizational health in these areas.

It is important to remember, however, that we are not complete pawns of the organizations in which we work. We contribute to the climate and need to understand our own behavior and contributions. Leiter and Maslach report that the one most successful element in preventing and intervening in burnout situations is engagement. Healthy organizations encourage and foster engagement. But there is also personal responsibility for engagement and it is this element that keeps us vital as professionals, giving us staying power.

So what might engagement look like? It is an energetic, involved, and effective state of interaction with the work. It is neither organizational commitment nor job involvement, which focus on aspects within the organization, but rather it is the intellectual and emotional connection one has with one's work. We stay in the profession not simply because the organization in which we work is agile, has a healthy capacity to change, and supplies us opportunities for growth, but because we ourselves can embrace that capacity by being agile, ready to lean into change, and intent upon our own professional growth. We have to be intellectually curious, seeing not only what is immediate, but looking at what we do as part of a bigger whole. We take initiative and the responsibility for problem solving or decision making within the context of the work. Engaged librarians have a commitment to the tenets or values of the profession, incorporating these into subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways of how we approach our work. We have opinions and ideas about the work and we share them. We think about the work, even when we are not at work. Creativity, a sense of challenge, and what I call "intellectual appetite" are part of being engaged.

It's good to be clear about burnout in a job versus burnout in the profession. While the first can certainly lead to the latter, we have to have enough courage to take care of our professional selves. At a certain point in one's career, it's very tempting to fall into commitment to a job because of salary, health benefits, earned pension, commute time, or family logistics. If we find ourselves in a job where we can't grow or an organization that tries to limit our engagement, we are the ones responsible for preventing our professional burnout. If we are honest with ourselves and think about it, most of us do have choices. We have to figure out ways to remain engaged. We can look for new ways to do our work, seek new responsibilities within the larger organization, commit to professional activities, or expand our own skill or knowledge base. And in the end, we can move. Yes, move to new employment. Are you still engaged with the work of librarianship. Do you like what you do? Then stop thinking that where you are is the only place you can be.

Remember, engagement is both a prevention and a therapy for burnout. Yes, we can do yoga, go to counseling, or take a long vacation to avoid the exhaustion that is part of burnout. But, in the final analysis, it's about having an appetite for the work, and the knowledge that we do have choices, that can make the difference in a healthy and long professional life. 

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