Work related stress in the outdoor education profession: a management perspective

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Abstract

This paper focuses on work related stress within the outdoor education profession in Australia, based on the second part of a research project exploring human resource management issues in the Australian outdoor education profession. The first part of the project is described elsewhere (Thomas, 2001) and this paper presents the findings of interviews with ten managers from outdoor education organisations. The time commitments, relationship difficulties, job characteristics and employee preparation, and perceptions of the profession's value were identified as the main work related stress challenges within the profession. The initiatives being used by managers to mitigate those challenges included building supportive communities, enhancing job satisfaction through improved conditions and benefits, and providing professional development opportunities. An intelligent understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of burnout is needed along with awareness that multi-dimensional problems require multi-dimensional solutions.

Introduction

Human resource management in the outdoor education profession has a number of inherent challenges. Consider the following hypothetical situation.

Peter is the principal at a private school. The school has a strong outdoor education program and Peter has helped it to grow and develop. The outdoor education staff get a slightly reduced teaching workload compared to other teachers in the school, but when the outdoor education staff lead overnight trips, they have to prepare lessons for other teachers to use whilst supervising their classes. When trips occur on the weekends, the outdoor education staff do not receive any time off in lieu for their extra weekend and evening commitments. Two of the outdoor education staff have reached the point where they have had enough of the high work load and the stress, and they are looking for a career change. Peter doesn't want to lose his current staff, and would prefer to avoid having to recruit and induct new outdoor education staff. However, he can't convince the school board to approve any changes to the working conditions for the outdoor education staff.

Peter and his employees are fictitious but in the outdoor education profession their situation, or ones like it, are not uncommon. Most practitioners in outdoor education understand the challenging nature of continued employment in the profession. Yet, it is not just the practitioners who face difficulties. School principals, managers of outdoor education centres, and directors of outdoor companies also experience significant challenges managing their human resource. This paper will focus on one aspect of human resource management, the issue of work related stress.

There has been considerable research and interest in the phenomenon of work related stress, and in particular, burnout, since the mid 1970s. The research has primarily focussed...
on nurses, dentists, physicians, social workers, counsellors, psychologists and teachers (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Cherness, 1995; Dinham, 1997; Farber, 2000; Friedman, 2000; Huberman & Vandenberghe, 1999; Lambert, 1994; Maslach & Leiter, 1997, 1999; Potter, 1987). A review of this research and writing as it pertains to outdoor education has been previously published (Thomas, 2001) and only a brief summary will be included here.

Burnout has potentially serious social, moral and financial implications for organisations and individuals. According to the literature, burnout is not a homogenous phenomenon and it does not have a predictable and common set of symptoms, causes and treatment (Cherness, 1995; Farber, 2000; Friedman, 2000; Maslach & Leiter, 1997, 1999; Potter, 1987). This creates a number of potential problems. Firstly, there is great diversity in the range of symptoms listed and some of them seem to directly contradict others. Secondly, the symptoms listed are not peculiar to burnout, which makes accurate diagnosis difficult. Thirdly, if the symptoms of burnout can be so diverse, and in some cases diametrically opposed, the prescription of suitable treatment is likely to be similarly complicated. This implies that the optimal treatment or solution for one employee may be the opposite to the optimal treatment for another employee (Cherness, 1995; Farber, 2000; Friedman, 2000; Maslach & Leiter, 1997, 1999; Potter, 1987).

The typical causes of burnout are also complicated by their diversity and variety. Outdoor education practitioners in Australia have identified the factors that most contributed to work related stress as: long work hours, time away from home, the responsibility for other people's safety, the ability to maintain relationships, balancing the demands on their lives, and limited time for things both at work and elsewhere - not dissimilar to the factors cited in the broader burnout literature (Thomas, 2001).

The problems with identifying symptoms and causes for the burnout phenomena are consistent with Maslach and Leiter's (1997) claim that burnout cannot, and should not, be considered a one-dimensional problem. Rather they argue that burnout is caused by a "mismatch between the nature of the job and the nature of the person who does the job" (p. 9). To this end, in each and every case of burnout, the nature of the person must be considered, the nature of the job must be considered, and the way these two factors interact must be considered.

For some managers this may be a new way of conceptualising the burnout problem. It is possible that there may be nothing wrong with "the job", but rather the "the wrong person" is doing it. However, Maslach and Leiter (1997, pp. 34 & 37) do suggest that, "the roots of burnout stretch far beyond the individual into the work environment ... although it is the person that experiences burnout, it is the job situation that is the primary cause". Lambert (1994) argues that despite common perceptions, burnout is a process and not a sickness, a punishable offence, a disability, or a product. Therefore, employers should not conceptualise burnout just as a problem with employees, although it obviously involves employees.

Several authors have produced frameworks and models to enhance the understanding of the burnout phenomenon. Research conducted by Farber (2000), specifically into burnout amongst teachers, defines three subtypes of "burnt out" teachers: worn out; classic/frenetic, and under challenged. Worn out teachers experience difficulty because their desired outcomes are seemingly beyond their control despite all their best efforts. Classic/frenetic teachers are uncompromising in their efforts literally to the point of exhaustion. Under challenged teachers find work boring, unstimulating, and unrewarding. It is quite possible that all three types occur in outdoor education, even the under challenged, because outdoor education practitioners who spend much of their time in the field may in fact be required to do some quite repetitive and unstimulating work.

Interestingly, there has been little empirical research on work related stress in the outdoor profession but Edwards & Gray (1998) provide one notable exception. Writing from a poststructuralist narrative perspective they use the metaphor of a three-legged stool to describe the way outdoor education practitioners often fail to achieve balance in...
their lives. They explain this lack of equilibrium is often caused by difficulties with one of their three "stool legs", either the professional, interpersonal, or personal aspects of their lives. Edwards & Gray explain that the professional aspect of a practitioner's life (just one of the three stool legs) often assumes dominance over his/her interpersonal and personal lives (the other two stool legs), to the detriment of the outdoor education practitioner's general well being (stool utility).

Birmingham (1989) explored the factors effecting turnover and retention of staff in outdoor adventure organisations in North America. Whilst the study did not specifically explore work related stress, Birmingham identified factors that correlate with staff turnover for 644 subjects across five organisations. The research indicated that staff turnover in the organisations studied was most strongly influenced by: satisfaction (with job, pay, advancement, co-workers, supervisors, top-management, organisation); influence; and control.

The relationship between working conditions and job satisfaction has been well documented in human resource management literature particularly through the Two Factor Model of Motivation developed by Frederick Herzberg (Herzberg, 1974; Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959). According to these authors, levels of employee job satisfaction are a function of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The presence of intrinsic factors, or motivators, contributes to job satisfaction and include: achievement, recognition, the work itself, and responsibility. External, or hygiene, factors, lead to employee dissatisfaction if they are inadequate or absent. Interestingly, Herzberg found that the presence of hygiene factors did not necessarily create satisfaction but their absence did create dissatisfaction. Similarly, the absence of motivators did not necessarily lead to dissatisfaction.

Allen-Craig and Moonen (2002) conducted a survey investigating remuneration packages and working conditions of outdoor education professionals in Victoria, Australia. However, they provided very little interpretation of the data and they did not investigate, or comment on, the impact of the reported remuneration packages and working conditions on levels of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Although Allen-Craig and Moonen suggest that a better understanding of working conditions will help with the professional development of the outdoor education field, this strategy alone is only part of the solution because, according to the Two Factor Model of Motivation (Herzberg, 1974; Herzberg et al., 1959), better working conditions will not necessarily improve job satisfaction or reduce staff turnover unless suitable intrinsic factors are also provided to employees.

The research described in this paper seeks to enhance the understanding of the human resource management issues in the outdoor education profession in two ways: firstly, by identifying, from the perspective of ten managers, the factors that contribute to work related stress for outdoor education practitioners; and secondly, by reporting on the initiatives currently being used by the same ten managers to mitigate those work related stress factors and maximise employee satisfaction.

Methodology
Ten managers of outdoor education programs, centres, or companies were invited by letter to participate in the research and all agreed to participate. The managers were purposively selected from diverse geographical locations – Victoria (5), New South Wales (2), Australian Capital Territory (1), and Queensland (2) – to explore any differences that may exist in some of the different states of Australia. The managers were selected from a range of organisations in order to explore potential relationships between work related stress and organisational type. The organisations represented included: educational institutions (4), not-for-profit organisations (4), and private companies (2). The number of employees in the organisations ranged from 10 to 100 and these comparatively larger organisations were chosen because of the likelihood that their respective managers might have greater insights and experiences managing a range of employee issues. The organisations approached had all been operating for a minimum of five years and some for as long as twenty years.

The ten managers participated in semi-structured interviews of 40-80 minutes...
duration, which collected information on demographics, employee working conditions, employee management strategies, stress management and prevention strategies, and career planning strategies. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using standard word processing software and the informants' responses were manually coded into conceptual categories. The data were then compared and contrasted using the method of agreement and disagreement to determine emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Results and Discussion

Work Related Stress Challenges
The managers of outdoor education programs and centres in this research project identified a number of major challenges for the outdoor education profession in the area of employee work related stress. The issues were classified into the following broad categories: time commitments; relationships; job characteristics and employee preparation; and perceptions of the profession's value.

Time Commitments
For all but one of the 10 informants two factors were reported to be a problem for their employees: the constant demands on their employees' time, and the high levels of interpersonal contact experienced by employees. Previous research (Thomas, 2001) has supported this assertion that the long hours of work, the weekend work, and the evening work are a major source of stress for outdoor education practitioners in Australia. It is perhaps time to question whether extended hours of contact and weekend and evening work are essential to realise program outcomes, given the stress it places on staff. Although some practitioners would vigorously defend the value and importance of the extended contact that occurs in outdoor education programs there has been very little research published on the effect of program length and duration on outcomes. One informant's organisation had adopted a standard 40 hour working week, and the employees of that organisation do not experience difficulties with time commitments in the same way.

... the thing that keeps them fresh is 6 o'clock at night they get to go home, cut their lawns, say g'day to the wife and kids, or hubby and kids, or go out and have a night on the town, then rock back into work, pick up where they dropped off. Informant #5

Some may doubt the ability of practitioners to "pick up where they dropped off", but according to this manager, it has been a successful strategy to reduce the work related stress that employees previously experienced.

Relationships. With regard to relationships, the informants indicated that their employees experience difficulties with the lack of stability or permanence in relationships, and the lack of time to spend with significant others. One informant from an organisation with longer programs described the challenge in this way,

It's like living overseas, living away from your family and your friends ... because they are not spending quality time with the person they want to be with, we say to them when they start, look there is nearly 100% failure rate if you have got a relationship ... because you are not going to be able to have regular contact with them ... it is very difficult. Informant #6

When asked why people leave his/her organisation, another informant responded,

The married ones? The main reason for leaving would be to appease the family, to get back into a time when they can be at home with their partner or their kids. Informant #9

These findings are supported by previous empirical research (Thomas, 2001) where 40% of the 225 respondents indicated that they experienced negative work related stress because their work affected their ability to maintain relationships with family and friends. Additionally, 60% of respondents found work
stressful because their work involved significant amounts of time away from home.

If the relationship difficulties and the time away from home are as problematic for practitioners as research to date suggests, then a significant challenge for employers is to find ways of addressing the problem to prevent practitioners leaving the profession earlier than desired.

Job Characteristics and Employee Preparation
Informants indicated that employees experience very similar symptoms and causes of burnout as those identified in the literature on burnout in the helping professions. The repetitious nature of the work, the overload, and the search for perfection were common themes. One informant felt quite passionately about the responsibility of the profession to prepare people for the challenges that people may face in the area of burnout:

I am a bit critical of organisations ... whether it be a training organisation, like university, ... or an employer, that never lays it out on the cards to the incoming employee about the longevity. So, often they come in with rose tinted glasses thinking they can stay in this profession for quite a long time and by the time they've been in there for three to five years and they are burnt out ... [Organisations] never talk about shelf life, not really because they want the bum on the seat. Informant #3

If that is true, then the outdoor profession may not have been fulfilling its responsibility to warn and prepare new employees for the challenges that working in the profession is likely to present to them. If employees were more informed and aware of the challenges of burnout in selection and induction phases, then perhaps some early departures from the profession could be averted. Returning to Maslach and Leiter's (1997) definition of burnout as a mismatch between the nature of the person and the nature of the job, perhaps employers have a duty to discourage some applicants from entering the profession at all.

Others may need careful, individualised training, coaching and career planning to prevent early departures from the profession caused by burnout. This is not just a problem for the employee, because it has far reaching effects on organisations too, as recognised by one informant:

The expense associated with recruitment and selection is quite high and I wonder if the outdoor education profession recognises that, and makes any attempt to balance the costs of training and professional development against - and keeping your staff - against the continual process of recruitment, selection and training of new staff. Informant #3

Perceptions of the Profession's Value
Some informants indicated that they have trouble keeping staff because they struggle to pay employees what they are worth. This was more of an issue for the informants from not-for-profit organisations than for the informants from school settings. This finding is consistent with other research that found that 81% of outdoor education practitioners employed by schools received an annual salary in excess of $46000, whereas 73% of practitioners employed by "not for profit" organisations and private companies received an annual salary of less than $46000 (Thomas, 2001).

One informant summarised the difficulties some employers and employees experience:

You would have to say that if you work in the outdoor education profession that you are getting less salary for an equivalent job on the outside. Informant #3

Another informant from a not-for-profit organisation believed,

We need to find ways to increase salaries, but to do that means you have to increase your fee structure to the schools, so that they pay...
more, or if we don't increase the salaries we need to find ways to make loads more manageable.

Informant #8

The issue of adequate financial remuneration was less pressing for informants from schools and similar institutions because their employees work under set awards that dictate the conditions of employment. However, in the not-for-profit sector of the profession, it is painfully obvious that the profession has not successfully convinced "customers" and the general public of the value of outdoor education and its potential contribution to society.

I think it [the profession] is undervalued, because I think we have grown out of this sort of view that time in the outdoors is recreation and so there is always this issue of 'you are doing something you like, and I do it for leisure, therefore why should you be paid a lot for it' ... the profession has to be professionalised in its sense of recognising what it is doing well, and it's part of that whole process of 'What is your motive of service?'

Informant #1

Another difficulty that informants described is the limited opportunities for employees to advance up the career ladder, and this factor, combined with others, contributes to the high turnover at the "field" staff level. There seems to be no shortage of new people keen to enter the field, which can lead to exploitation. One informant expressed valid concerns that,

Young people are also prepared to take on pretty ordinary conditions and are prepared to take lower pay, and sometimes in a bid to, because they are out there either for the environment or for the student whatever, they are a little bit idealistic in their approach and I don't think it

helps the overall career path of it. Informant #2

Initiatives being used within the outdoor education profession to mitigate work related stress

The informants in the study had identified, and were implementing, a diverse range of strategies to deal with work related stress challenges. The initiatives being used by the informants were classified into the following broad categories: building supportive communities; addressing job satisfaction/dissatisfaction through improved conditions and benefits; and professional development opportunities. The strategies identified represent a range of intrinsic and extrinsic factors as identified by Herzberg (Herzberg, 1974; Herzberg et al., 1959).

Building supportive communities (intrinsic factor)

Almost all of the informants mentioned the value and importance of creating supportive communities for employees. However, the strategies informants used were different, as illustrated in these comments:

[There is] a lot of individual recognition of where people are at I think ... so basically an employee knows they can go and talk to [the person in charge of the roster], who can implement and change the roster. Informant #4

There is a very high sense of looking after each other here ... so there is a fair team effort that helps the longevity here as well. Informant #5

It is very community focused, the majority of staff here live together ... people find it very hard to move on because they really are part of this community. I think a lot of the friends they make here are the friends that stick with them for the rest of their lives. Informant #6
It provides a pretty healthy community for people to live and work in, and that is something that you have to work very hard at as an organisation, but I think we do it very well ... we try to meet together at least once a week and people teach each other. Informant #7

I think it is a very supportive environment in that if people have projects or ideas that they want to pursue they are very much encouraged or supported with it. Informant #9

The strategies for building supportive communities were workplace specific and there was not an easy “one size fits all” solution. Each of the informants had developed responses that catered to their specific organisational type, structure, size, staff numbers and different personalities.

Enhancing job satisfaction through improved conditions, benefits, and rewards (extrinsic factor)
The informants indicated a wide range of strategies to address this hygiene factor. There were some similar themes between informants, but strategies to enhance job satisfaction varied as much as the challenges that each workplace presented. Some of the more creative methods being used by informants included: access to cheap/free accommodation, free meals whilst on programs (and even off programs), salary packaging options that create useful tax benefits, access to cheap or free training and development by using more experienced staff to run courses internally, limiting employee expenses whilst at work, attractive holiday and time in lieu arrangements, access to international exchanges, and opportunities to travel with work.

Interestingly, only one informant mentioned the importance of providing staff with positive feedback, praise, and individual recognition as a means to enhance job satisfaction. Compared to other strategies, this is a pretty cheap and easy initiative for managers to implement and it was an effective part of this informant’s strategy to enhance employee job satisfaction. Many of the informants demonstrated that despite the difficulty of not being able to pay staff what they were believed they were worth, other creative initiatives could be developed to enhance job satisfaction. However, even within the same organisation the strategy for satisfying one employee may well be very different to that required for another. The managers understood that even if their organisations were restricted in their ability to reward employees with excellent working conditions (extrinsic factor), job satisfaction could still be enhanced by helping employees to realise other intrinsic rewards.

Professional development opportunities (intrinsic factor)
Most of the informants indicated that they provided training and development opportunities in either a fully or partially subsidised form. The nature of the professional development offered varied, including internal training programs, external training, university study, and training on things other than technical skills. The informants from “not for profit” organisations seemed to work particularly hard to package professional development opportunities into some form that provides mutual benefit to the employer and employee. The larger organisations seem to be able to do this by running a lot of training internally.

If you are on a four year contract you would be given opportunities to do extended training and we would probably be up-skilling you and keeping your skills current, whereas [if you demonstrate less commitment to the organization] ... you will get what you need to do your job but you won’t get something you might be interested in, like search and rescue. Informant #6

This year we have trialed what we call a ‘manager in training’ program where a staff member applies to be a
manager in training ... and if he or she is accepted, they get paid an increment to do that training, so they get $750 ... and when they have successfully completed that training they get another $750 and that is a responsibility allowance because we feel they've now got the skills. Informant #8

Some informants indicated that their organisations were also committed to training staff for working life "after outdoor education". This demonstrates a deep commitment to the development of employees beyond the immediate self interest of the organisation.

Informant #8

... There are other facets to keeping people happy here, one is to ensure that they are getting opportunities for professional development, the focus there would be about outdoor ed to a large extent, but there are others too, some of the staff want to go for their Masters of something like that and we try and be flexible about their duty requirements, given those commitments. Informant #7

The people, who have committed to us, we want to reward them by giving them every skill that they can walk out of here with, so they can get a job as well. Informant #6

A number of the informants indicated that their organisations try to do some strategic career planning with employees.

So we really try and get people in and actually interview them and start them on a base saying, 'Where do you want to head?' and 'What time frame?' and 'How are we going to work at it?' Informant #4

Implications and Limitations

The informants in this study were motivated to provide a positive working environment that met their employees' needs for extrinsic and intrinsic rewards to optimise job satisfaction. Given the potential for burnout for employees in the outdoor profession, preventative strategies should become enshrined and incorporated into outdoor education organisations' philosophy and administration procedures. This research project has highlighted some of the strategies that organisations have used to deal with the issue of work related stress.

The unique characteristics of different organisations within the outdoor profession necessitates a responsive, rather than prescriptive approach to burnout prevention. Without downplaying the importance of appropriate working conditions and remuneration, the factors that contribute to job satisfaction may be best fostered through intrinsic factors. The diversity of strategies used by informants to build supportive work communities highlights how work related stress problems do not have single, quick fix solutions that can be successfully applied unilaterally. Further research is needed to investigate the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic factors to the levels of job satisfaction and burnout experienced by outdoor education practitioners.

The leaders of outdoor education organisations and schools need to develop an informed understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of burnout and the fact that multi-dimensional problems require multi-dimensional solutions. Outdoor education managers/employers may benefit if they keep some of the following questions at the forefront of their minds. Are any of our employees showing the symptoms of burnout? What are the cause/s of their
symptoms? Treating the symptoms and stress of burnout without addressing the causes will only exacerbate the problem (Richman, 1998). How is the match between the nature of the job and the person doing the job? How can we better match the employee with the job?

The provision of suitable professional development of employees was a critical human resource management strategy for the 10 managers in this research project. To optimise the effectiveness of training interventions, human resource management specialists suggest that a thorough diagnosis of training and development needs to occur. This involves careful analysis of organisational needs, job needs, and individual needs (Clark & Seward, 2000). Managers should ensure that the training and development being provided shapes “the kind of abilities that will ensure that professional occupational dreams persist over time” (Friedman, 2000, p. 602). Historically, career planning has been considered the domain of the individual. The outdoor education profession needs to recognise the potential of career planning to meet both individual and organisational needs by improving employee motivation and creating a pool of promotable talent for the organisation. Werther and Davis (1996, p. 317) suggest that high quality career planning “develops promotable employees, assists with workforce diversity, lowers turnover, taps employee potential, furthers personal growth, and satisfies employee needs”.

Good career planning requires “manpower (sic) development specialists who are involved in appraisals, succession planning, promotion, assessment centres, development of high flyers, and counselling” (Clark & Seward, 2000, p. 356). Does the outdoor education profession have people with these skills? At least one organisation that participated in this research has employed a qualified human resource management specialist, from outside the profession, to help them better manage human resource issues. If the profession doesn’t outsource such expertise, what qualifications and training should the managers of outdoor education develop in human resource management area? Effective human resource management draws upon new knowledge, skills and understanding that a typical outdoor education practitioner may not have developed. The importance of such career planning and mapping cannot be understated in terms of creating a good match between the nature of the job and the nature of the employee.

This research project set out to describe, from the perspective of 10 managers, the factors that contribute to work related stress for outdoor education practitioners and the initiatives currently being used to mitigate those work related stress factors and maximise employee satisfaction. The sample used in this study did not set out to be fully representative of all those involved in the outdoor profession in Australia. Only managers of organisations on the east coast of Australia, and those from larger organisations (more than 10 employees), were involved in the study. The issues and concerns with work related stress and job satisfaction could be quite different for organisations in other areas and for smaller organisations. The organisations invited to participate in this study were selected because they were longstanding, and well known in the outdoor education profession. This creates another potential distortion and the managers of newer, lesser-known organisations may provide quite different responses to the research questions posed in this study.

The fictitious principal at the start of this paper was dealing with some common work related stress issues for outdoor education practitioners. Many of the organisations that participated in this research are working hard to address those types of issues. However, the strategies being used varied greatly, and for good reasons. It would make sense for managers and principals of outdoor education organisations to continue sharing their challenges and successes. The adolescent, outdoor education profession is ‘growing up’, even if a little reluctantly, as one informant suggested.

In the 70s and 80s [we were] a bunch of hippies running around, doing all this radical stuff, but we have got to act like the rest of the world, we have to be professional, in our dealings, we can’t just have wonderful ideas, they are important, but we have to...

References...

Abel, B. (1998)....
have our behaviours that are appropriate. Informant #6

As a developing field, outdoor education is becoming more professional, but there is a need to be more astute communicators of the contribution that outdoor education can make to society. If we are not clear on what that contribution is, then the profession needs to find out. If we can’t agree, are there are common threads amidst our diversity that we can develop and promote? Maybe the outdoor education profession can do some of its “radical stuff” and set benchmarks in human resource management that other professions can aspire towards.

References

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