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Episode title: Resolving workplace burnout is necessary for winning in the war for talent

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Natalie Runyon: Hi everyone, this is Natalie Runyon, Director of Enterprise Content for Talent, Inclusion and Culture topics and one of your hosts of the Thomson Reuters Institute podcast. Welcome back to the show. Today I'm speaking with Paula Davis, CEO of the Stress and Resilience Institute and author of the recent book, *Beating Burnout at Work: Why Teams Hold the Secret to Well-Being and Resilience*. Today we are talking everything burnout, how it differs from stress and what organizations, leaders and managers can do to alleviate burnout for their employees. Here's my conversation with Paula. Hey Paula, thanks for joining.

Paula Davis: Thanks so much for having me, Natalie. I'm so happy to be here to discuss this important topic.

Natalie Runyon: Yeah, it is important. So, I know that you recently published a book earlier this year, and that's something that has been a major goal of yours and your journey. So, can you talk a little about the book and then also your journey and coming to create the Stress and Resilience Institute.

Paula Davis: Yes, so my book is really what I'd call my 10-year unfolding "a-ha" moment that started back in like 2009-ish or so when I burned out during what became the last year of my law practice. So, I practiced law for seven years and burned out, and I didn't know what it was, and I didn't know how to explain it or talk about it. I mean, if you had said the word "burnout" I probably kind of knew what it was, but I was just having this experience with not being able to manage stress that was really wholly different from what I had experienced at other points in my career. And really, at other points in my life, and so it was a really a journey in a process to get myself through that. I ended up having to really self-diagnose and decided that I wanted to leave my law practice and go back and study well-being and resilience and other areas of science to help workplaces, to help leaders and to help teams really, more proactively designed an environment where burnout was less likely to happen, and so that led me to the University of Pennsylvania applied positive Masters in applied positive psychology program, which was really an amazing experience and led to what became part 2 of my education, which was being able to stay on and teach at the University of Pennsylvania as they had just created a program with the United States Army, it was a train the trainer program to teach senior noncommissioned officers and officers and their families the skills associated with developing and building resilience so that they themselves could use the skills and notice the benefits and then also pay it forward to the lower ranking soldiers in their units, so it was just a phenomenal life changing program for me in so many different ways. And we ended up training collectively about 40,000 soldiers or so during the time that that I was part of the program, and so that really launched me into, you know, the work that I do now, and you know, continuing to research and write and talk about resilience, resilience at the team and leader level and then also, of course, how to prevent burnout.

Natalie Runyon: Great, thank you so much for sharing your story. So, I know in your book you start off and one of the major core tenants is defining the difference between stress and burnout. So, can you share that information with our audience?

Paula Davis: Yes, so this is one of the biggest ways I think we go wrong in the conversation that we have about burnout because we use the terms interchangeably. We use burnout as a word that is wholly synonymous with just general stress. And it's not. It's a very specific type of stress, and so it's also, I think, difficult for folks is that stress exists on a continuum, right? So, you have really stressful days, and you have days where you don't feel nearly as stressed. So, the same thing with burnout. Burnout exists on a continuum as well. And so, when I was first entering what I now know to be burnout it showed up like coming into work 20 minutes later, 30 minutes later, and as a lawyer, I didn't really have a start time, but I was in-house counsel, and it, you know, was becoming pretty clear that I was the last one rolling in on most days and that started to be noticed. And I, you know, didn't have as many lunches with my colleagues and fewer, you know, Friday evening beverage, you know, let's go out and, you know, get together on a Friday evening sort of thing. And when we had holiday parties. I would roll in late and leave early, and all of those things started to be noticed, but it was kind of a more subtle entry into burnout. Probably something that never even registered with me, as even being something different. By the time I was sort of done with the whole burnout process, a year later, I was getting panic attacks on a regular basis, and I was in the emergency room twice because I had really bad stomach aches from the stress that I was experiencing. And because I just couldn't eat, I couldn't get stress out of my life essentially, and so it's important to recognize that in both sides of the equation you can be in a whole host of different places. So not everybody gets to that sort of extreme end of the burnout spectrum, like I did. I mean, we can have really stressful days, and it doesn't necessarily mean that we're burned out. So, there's three big warning signs or three big dimensions that I always like to tell people. These are sort of the sort of your initial, should be sort of like lightbulb moments like if you're noticing these on a regular basis this is an indicator of burnout more so than stress. So, the first one is that you feel chronically, physically and emotionally exhausted. So for me, nothing that I did gave me or replenished my energy. So you still, you know, play coed softball and a lot of sports with my friends and things and I stopped doing that and I just wanted some bad reality television on the couch and we all you know, especially over the last 12 to 18 months have felt this sense of exhaustion and the word to think about is I described these dimensions as chronic, so more often than not, over a period of time this is what you're noticing. So, it's that chronic physical emotional exhaustion is a big one. The second big warning sign is that, or dimension, is that I was chronically cynical, so that chronic cynicism everyone annoys you, everyone bothers you, particularly the people who you feel called to help. So, this could be your patients, this could be your clients, this could be your internal business clients. I remember always being outwardly professional, but inwardly a lot of eye-rolling going on thinking "Do we have to have this conversation. Do you really need my help with this?" And of course they did, so that cynicism piece is a big one. And then this third big warning sign, or dimension, is a sense of what the research calls in efficacy. I call it the why bother? Who cares? So, are you saying that to yourself more frequently? Like "What am I doing here?" Or "What is my impact?" Or, you know, I'm really disengaging and I'm you know, why bother? Who cares? It doesn't matter what I say or do? You know, I'm not being recognized or, you know, just not feeling this sense of engagement with my work, so it's all three of those things, so it's chronic exhaustion, chronic cynicism, and that sense of why bother, who cares. All three of those things need to be present in order to earn the label of burnout, so I think that's an important thing for folks to remember that, you know, we sometimes, you know, come home at the end of the day, or we just think, oh man, I'm just so tired. I'm just so burned out, that we really have to pay attention to how we're using those words because the precision in language matters when it comes to this, so those are the three big sort of dimensions or signs that I want people to think about.

Natalie Runyon: Yeah, that's so interesting, I hadn't realized that cynicism was part of it so that's very, very new to me. So, I feel like all many people during the pandemic probably had all three of those dimensions. So, what has your research told you about burnout during the pandemic? And, you know, how to address it just given the scale of so many people going through it?

Paula Davis: Yeah, so one big takeaway that I like to tell my folks who I talked to is that the pandemic didn't cause burnout. So, I have in my book a whole laundry list of statistics about what we know across industry, different groups, burnout rates, and all of those statistics are pre-pandemic and they're not good when you see them. And so, I don't want people to think that the pandemic came along and sprouted this thing called burnout. It's been a massive problem in organizations for many, many years. And I think that if there is a silver lining to the pandemic that's one of the things that came from it is that we're now more open and willing to address and have these conversations. Because what happened for so many of us, regardless of what level we're at in organizations, it added a whole pile of demands to our plate. And if there's a simple formula, I can give folks for what causes or sprouts burnout it's that we have too many demands and too few resources. So too many things that take consistent effort and energy about our work and too few things that are energy giving and motivational or engaging about our work and so that equation was imbalanced to begin with and the pandemic added a lot more on the demand side of the equation and really, for many of us also took away some very important resources, especially when it comes to, you know, relationships and friendships and being able to just get out and see other people and so I think that, you know, we certainly know that burnout rates increased during the pandemic. And so that was really important to recognize is that they were already pretty bad to begin with, I think folks were struggling a lot as the pandemic started to happen and I think it really just kind of rip the band aid off and exposed that, you know, whether you're a high-level leader or regardless of what your title is, you know, we were stressed and we were taxed in a lot of different ways. And I think you're seeing that play out now with the great resignation where a lot of people are taking a step back and very seriously considering, do I want to go back to what that life looked like because it didn't really make a lot of sense for me before and I was just kind of going through the motions. I have a chance now to potentially reset or do something different or start the business I've always wanted to start or potentially do something that's more aligned with what I feel might bring some of that meaning and impact to bear so, so that's really that's really my message, around burnout and the pandemic for folks.

Natalie Runyon: Yeah, thank you for saying that 'cause I agree like the pandemic to, using your words, just rip the band aid off and we're talking about it more, but it also probably exposed the burnout in totally new ways. So, you know, if organizations are talent and the hyper competitive war for talent because of the great resignation and some other factors is such a big issue for companies, tax firms, law firms, et cetera, et cetera. So, what should organizations be doing to address their employee's collective burnout? You mentioned, we had too few resources and we had more demands on us and that's been a trend in Corporate America for I don't know the last two decades. So, what should organizations be doing now?

Paula David: Yes, and so this is a really important part of the conversation because another place where we go wrong here when we talk about burnout is, we first of all, as I mentioned, tend to think about it as just another type of stress, and it's a little bit of a different animal than that. And we also really just kind of make it this myopic thing, focused only on that exhaustion piece. So, when I ask, people tell me a

word or a phrase that comes to mind when you think of the word burnout about 85% of them say something around exhaustion or feeling tired, or that that realm of things. And that's important to recognize, but as I just mentioned, there's more to the dimensions of burnout than just feeling exhausted. So, what we do is we think about it as just this syndrome of just basic stress that leads to exhaustion. And then we apply we sort of go into our self-help bag and pull out some self-help strategies and some basic, you know, well-being frontline stress management strategies and those are all really important tools in the realm of a collective approach to a lot of these issues, but they are oftentimes not enough or misapplied when it comes to the burnout conversation, and that's because what I, you know, now educate and help leaders and teams and organizations to realize is we have to start having a deeper conversation. So, if burnout is happening in our organizations, we have to take a step back and ask "Why?" What are the causes, and the research tells us there's really a core six. There are more specific ones depending on industry, but these are really some universal core causes that organizations really have to start thinking about and having tough conversations about and it is things like lack of flexibility so, again, the pandemic has taught us this is something we really - this is not a "nice to have" for work. This is something we crave. This is something that we need, right? Being able to say how we work and when we work and where we work. So, having a sense of flexibility and not getting enough of that. Unmanageable workload is one that I see almost universally with the teams that I work with. Not having that right community, right? Not leader or team support, I don't feel like people have my back. I don't feel supported when I come to work. Unfairness, so lack of transparency, favoritism, a lot of closed-door meetings, things of that nature. Values disconnect and lack of recognition. So, lack of recognition is a big one. It goes all the way from not hearing a basic "Thank you" enough to not a lot of positive feedback. Not a lot of specific feedback about things people are doing well titles not matching where people feel that they are working, not being invited to have a seat at the table at important meetings, so it's that whole realm of things that that organizations and teams really have to start thinking about, but that we know that there are some very key job resources, those energy giving and motivational aspects of work, that really help, and so it is being given or having that sense of flexibility or some job control that regular sense of feedback, knowing my leader has my back. So, leaders being able to demonstrate certain behaviors in specific ways that that builds that. Having a sense of clarity and transparency about your work, about your role, about who you're supposed to report to. The sequence of how your projects and matters and deals should be done. And then having enough, you know, professional development opportunities we don't like to stagnate at work. We like to know that we are getting stretch assignments and that we are getting closer to accomplishing goals that really matter to us. So, it's that whole cluster of things, plus a lot more that I detail in my book, that leaders and teams and organizations need to start to at least prioritize in a much greater way and build that into the equation in a proactive way within the context of their environments and that will help us start to get our arms around slowing burnout down.

Natalie Runyon: Yeah, thank you for elaborating on that, and it's really interesting because as I was listening to what you were describing, you know, the words, "Oh, that's something that I hear from underrepresented individuals when I talk to them" or that that that describes, you know, that people want a sense of belonging. And so, I want to, you know, talk a little bit about that, because I think there's some universal skills that you're talking about in the, you know, burnout or resilience context that also can apply and create an increasing engagement with employees, particularly for manager and the managers' critical role in that so and I know that one of the terms that you have used is

psychological safety. So, can you define this concept for us? The importance of the managers role in creating it. And also, what skills can managers have to create it?

Paula Davis: Yes, so psychological safety I found in researching my book is not just a nice to have, it's critical, so my whole argument or thesis is that if we have to start addressing burnout in more of a systemic, in more of a holistic way, that teams are a really great entry point to do that because teams are sort of our little mini systems within our larger organizational culture or system. And so, what the research was very clear about when I was then trying to figure out, "OK, then what do teams, what are the behaviors that teams need to display? What do leaders need to do to proactively create the type of environment that grows engagement and resilience and thriving and well-being and slows burnout down?" and psychological safety really emerged as one of the foundational elements. It's going to be harder to put some of the rest of the pieces of the puzzle into place if you don't have it, and so simply, psychological safety is really just trust. It's trust and cohesion at the group or the team level, and it's the belief that you can show up to work, that you can show up to your teams as yourself, that you can ask questions that you can disagree respectfully, that you can push back, that you can propose or pitch innovative partially formed ideas that you can take good risks and raise problems when you see them without the worry that you are going to be embarrassed or penalized, or singled out or put down. Or, you know, somehow what you say is going to be devalued so it's the sense that you can do all of those positive things without all of that sort of downside happening. And when we see environments when we see teams that have high levels of psychological safety and trust it, people just speak up. They say what's on their mind. I think about it as sort of like the John, you know, John Mayer had a song, "Say what you need to say" so, you know, high psychologically safe teams and resilient teams. They say what needs to be said. Tough stuff, good stuff, positive stuff. All of it. They're able to, again, share innovative ideas easier and sooner in the process. Teams with high psychological safety really are able to get out in front of mistakes and serious issues and errors before they become huge problems now that that maybe the organization has to tackle in a different way so, there's lots of benefits to it, but importantly, really some key behaviors for leaders and really everyone on the team to start to think about, to operationalize, so it's things like being accessible and approachable, so really, this a lot of leaders might have to take a step back and look in the mirror and get a big dose of self-awareness around "how approachable are you, really?" Really, when people are in your space or in your realm, so it's those things it's acknowledging the limits of your knowledge, which can be really, really hard for leaders to do, but it is one of the most powerful signals of trust and psychological safety to be able to say, "you know what I haven't really seen this issue before, this is a new nuance, not 100% sure how to navigate this. What do we all think? Let's talk about it collectively" is really powerful. Giving everybody a say, giving everybody a chance to sort of voice an opinion and you might need to run meetings a little bit differently and more proactively in order for that to happen, so you may need to send an agenda out ahead of time and ask people or prompt people or prime people to say "you know look, here's an issue that we're going to be talking about at our meeting tomorrow. I want to hear everybody's take on it" and let them think about it. The introverts in the room like me will be hugely appreciative of that and not being sort of like called on and then really the last cluster of behaviors is what I call you matter cues. So, really small basic things, like when someone joins a Teams or a zoom call saying, "Hey Nellie, how are you doing? It's so great to see you" acknowledging when people are in your space. If you're in an office environment, put your laptop lid down when somebody comes into the office and actually look them in the eye when you have a conversation. Calling people by name, pronouncing people names correctly. All of those kind of basic entry-level behaviors that we think are

important or know are important, become really amplified and critical to the trust conversations. So, that's just a very, very small beginning set of behaviors for leaders to think about. There's a lot more that I talk about in the book.

Natalie Runyon: Great, thank you. I'm going to add one more to that and it's particularly if you're leading a group discussion or a team meeting with both people in a conference room and people on video or on the phone, and that's making sure that you invite the people, you know, on the phone or attending video to contribute and be active about that and sometimes even pre-pandemic when people would attend sometimes they were forgotten, right? As part of the discussion.

Paula Davis: I think that's such an important thing, and I wanted I want to just add to that, you know, some things that I'm starting to hear about, you know, the new way we're working in a hybrid environment around too, how people who are maybe patching in by video or in some sort of virtual format to the group that might be in the conference room they almost feel like they're busting in on a pre-existing conversation, and it feels really weird, because when you chime in virtually and you see three people or four people or however many in a conference room, sort of, already talking and laughing and having that, you know, bond or camaraderie already developed, it feels weird. It feels like you're the outsider kind of trying to come in and so paying attention to that dynamic as well becomes a really important piece of this trust puzzle too.

Natalie Runyon: Yes, absolutely. Thank you for adding in that piece. So, in the final question I just want to zoom out for a minute. Many of the organizations' actions that you have described are, like I mentioned before, good for employee engagement, maintaining employees' positive perceptions about their career prospects, are great behaviors to have to lead a diverse team from many different backgrounds, so can you help us understand the linkage to talent retention, particularly as we are in this hyper competitive war for talent?

Paula Davis: Sure, so there's a really strong business case for preventing burnout, and I'm not sure that leaders and folks and organizations necessarily realize how many things that are important to the way the organization or the firm operates are linked to what we know about burnout and burnout prevention. So, burnout is closely linked to rates of errors. There's it's closely linked to turnover and turnover intention to absenteeism, to decrease productivity into quality, safety and patient and client satisfaction. And so, when we start to get our arms around burnout, we can then in the right way, and when we start to incorporate some of these really key behaviors, particularly at the leader level, we can start to see then some of those things start to get better. Attrition rates start to go down. When I interview people and when I can tell and when I can sense that there is the right type of environment going on in an organization, they say things like "I would never leave" like "this is such a dynamic place to work", "I'm so happy to come into work every day". And so, there's so many different ways that the burnout conversation influences all of these other conversations. that we're talking about and what's really important, and one of the interesting aspects I think that the research needs to continue to tease apart is the interplay between burnout and engagement. And so, what's interesting is that we oftentimes think of engagement as the opposite of burnout, and the research is really starting to show that that's not the case, that they're their own separate sort of beings or entities or animals for us to really start to think about. And there's some interesting studies showing that you can be both highly engaged and highly burned out, so we don't want to send the message or we don't want to think oh because we have high engagement scores we must not have an issue with burnout. Or if somebody is

feeling engaged, they must not be burned out, also, that's not true. They can coexist, and so there's a lot of nuances around the engagement and burnout conversation that I think is really interesting for organizations to think about so, there's lots of lots of different ways the burnout conversation touches you know the attrition rates and malpractice issues and rates of errors and the engagement, conversation and that feeling of inclusivity and belonging, which is so critical to the diversity, equity and inclusion conversations that are so important right now. So, it's one of the many reasons why I love talking about the topic 'cause it touches on so many different pieces.

Natalie Runyon: Yes well, fascinating Paula. Thank you. I know that I've learned a lot and I know that our audience members who are listening have learned a lot. So, thank you so much for sharing your information and for sharing your knowledge and in doing what you do 'cause it's so important, and you know, particularly in this moment. Thank you for joining.

Paula Davis: You're so welcome. Thank you, Natalie.

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