

2026

Spotting Burnout Before It Peaks: A Manager's Guide

By mid-year, the signs of burnout are usually already there — they're just easy to miss, especially when they look like "just having an off week." For managers and HR partners, catching burnout early isn't about diagnosing anyone. It's about noticing patterns and creating space for a conversation before performance or wellbeing takes a real hit.

What Burnout Actually Looks Like

Burnout isn't the same as being tired. The World Health Organization frames it as an occupational phenomenon with three core dimensions:

- **Exhaustion** — not just fatigue, but a depleted, "running on empty" feeling that doesn't resolve with a weekend off
- **Cynicism or detachment** — increasing distance from the job, colleagues, or the mission itself
- **Reduced effectiveness** — a growing sense (sometimes only internal) of not doing good work, even when output looks fine on paper

The tricky part: burnout often hides behind competence. Someone can still be hitting deadlines while quietly disengaging

Signals Managers Are Well-Positioned to Notice

- A normally responsive person going quiet in meetings or on Slack
- Increased irritability or cynicism about things they used to care about
- Visible effort to "push through" rather than any sign of enjoying the work
- More sick days, or the opposite — never taking time off at all
- A shift from big-picture thinking to just getting through the task list

None of these alone means burnout. But a cluster of them, sustained over a few weeks, is worth a conversation.

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What Helps (and What Doesn't)

Doesn't help: generic wellness reminders, "just take a break," waiting until someone hits a breaking point to act.

Does help:

- A direct, low-pressure check-in — "I've noticed X, how are you doing with everything on your plate?"
- Naming workload or role clarity issues explicitly, rather than treating it as a personal resilience problem
- Normalizing use of EAP resources before a crisis, not just after
- Modeling boundaries yourself — teams take cues from what leaders actually do, not just what they say

The Manager's Role Isn't to Fix It

You don't need to solve burnout — that's not the job. The job is noticing early, opening the door to support, and making sure people know where to go next. That's exactly where EAP resources like Kintsugi Consulting come in: a confidential, professional space to work through what's underneath the exhaustion.

If your team could benefit from a workshop on early burnout recognition, or if you'd like to talk through how to support a specific situation, reach out — we're glad to help.