



SPOTTING THE STORM

BY

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PART 1 MINI SERIES ADAPTED FROM CHAOS MANAGEMENT, A
REFLECTIVE LOOK AT WORKPLACE BURNOUT AND COMMUNICATION
CHALLENGES

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*How to Recognize Workplace
Chaos Before It Breaks You*

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Companion Guide, Part 1 of 3

Adapted and expanded from *Chaos
Management: A Reflective Look at
Workplace Burnout and Communication
Challenges*

INTRODUCTION

Every workplace has bad days. What this book is about is something different: the workplace that runs on bad days, where disorganization isn't the exception but the operating system. Chaos management is what happens when leadership mistakes control for structure, when fear stands in for guidance, and when the people doing the actual work are expected to hold everything together with no map, no backup, and no thanks.

This short guide is the first in a three-part series built around a single true story — a retail employee who showed up for an ordinary Sunday shift and walked into a company-wide meltdown with zero warning. You'll meet that story properly in Part 2. Here, in Part 1, the goal is narrower and, in some ways, more useful: learning to recognize the warning signs of a chaotic workplace before

they cost you your health, your time, or your peace of mind.

If you've ever left a shift feeling like you'd been in a fight you didn't sign up for or found yourself dreading the drive to work on a Sunday because you genuinely didn't know what you'd be walking into — this book is for you.

PART ONE: WHAT WORKPLACE CHAOS ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE

Chaos management rarely announces itself. Nobody puts "we operate through disorganization and fear" in the job posting. Instead, it shows up in patterns — small at first, then impossible to ignore. Based on the lived experience at the center of this series, and echoed in workplace research across industries, here are the core symptoms.

No structure, no consistency. Rules change depending on who's asking and what mood leadership is in. Expectations shift week to week with no documentation and no notice. You're never quite sure what "doing a good job" means because the target keeps moving.

Fear as a management tool. Instead of clear expectations and support, chaotic workplaces lean on anxiety to keep people

compliant. Deadlines get thrown out like dodgeballs, and you're expected to catch everyone — blindfolded, with no coaching on how.

Information hoarding. Leadership sits on details that directly affect your ability to do your job — a reorganization, policy change, a shift in ownership — and lets you find out the hard way. In the case at the heart of this series, an entire store's inventory and brand identity changed overnight with no memo, no phone call, and no warning to the staff who had to explain it to confused customers the next morning.

Nitpicking without support. Chaotic managers show up to criticize, not to help. They check in only to find fault, rarely to ask what you need. Support, when it's needed most, goes missing.

Understaffing dressed up as "efficiency." When a location is chronically short-staffed, and the people running it are quietly

absorbing the gap by working extra hours, doubling shifts, or covering roles they were never trained for, that is not lean management. That is chaos being pushed downhill onto the people with the least power to stop it.

PART TWO: WHAT CHAOS DOES TO YOU

It doesn't stay at work. That's the part people underestimate. Workplace chaos follows you home. You start calling out sick — not because you're lazy, but because the exhaustion has stopped being physical and started being something closer to grief. Stress becomes a constant companion. And if it goes on long enough, it tips into something with an actual clinical name: burnout.

FACT CHECK — What Burnout Actually Is

Burnout is not a personality flaw or a lack of resilience. The World Health Organization officially classifies burnout in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an "occupational phenomenon" resulting from chronic workplace stress that

has not been successfully managed. The WHO defines it by three specific dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job.
- Reduced professional efficacy.

Importantly, the WHO is explicit that burnout refers specifically to the occupational context — it should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life. That distinction matters because it means burnout isn't something wrong with you. It's a documented, recognized response to an environment that failed to manage its own chaos. (Source: World Health Organization, "Burn-out an 'occupational phenomenon': International Classification of Diseases," May 28, 2019, [who.int](https://www.who.int))

This matters for a second reason too. Gallup's most recent State of the Global Workplace research found that only 20% of employees worldwide were engaged at work in 2025 — the lowest level since 2020 — and traced much of that decline directly to weakening manager engagement and support. When the people managing you are themselves disengaged, stretched thin, or unsupported, chaos doesn't stay contained to them. It rolls downhill. (Source: Gallup, State of the Global Workplace report, gallup.com/workplace/349484)

None of this is meant to diagnose you. It's meant to validate something you may already suspect: if your workplace feels chaotic, and you feel depleted, cynical, or less effective than you used to be, that is a documented and predictable outcome — not a personal failing.

PART THREE: ACTION ITEMS

— RECOGNIZING CHAOS EARLY

Use this checklist to evaluate a current job, or to screen a new opportunity before you accept it.

1. Ask about structure directly. In an interview or a check-in, ask: "How do priorities get communicated when they change?" A confident, specific answer is a good sign. A vague one is data.
2. Track the pattern, not the incident. One chaotic week happens everywhere. Write down what happens over a month. Patterns are what tell you whether you're dealing with a rough patch or a rough culture.
3. Notice who gets blamed when something goes wrong. In chaotic workplaces, blame consistently flows downhill onto the people with the least

power, regardless of who made the decision. Watch for this specifically.

4. Check the staffing math. If you are regularly doing the work of two or three people "until we can hire," ask for a real timeline in writing. Vague promises about future headcount are one of the most common early signs of a chronically understaffed, chaos-driven environment.
5. Pay attention to your own body. Are you calling out more? Dreading specific days? Feeling numb rather than frustrated? Your physical and emotional response is data, not weakness.
6. Ask what happens when people raise concerns. Ask a current or former coworker (not just your manager) what happened the last time someone flagged a problem. Their answer will

tell you more than any official policy will.

7. Look for documentation habits.

Workplaces that communicate well tend to document decisions, changes, and expectations in writing. The absence of any written record — everything communicated verbally, informally, or "as needed" — is a structural warning sign, not a neutral style choice.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Before you move to Part 2 of this series, sit with these questions honestly:

- When was the last time I felt genuinely supported, not just supervised, at work?
- Am I absorbing responsibilities that were never mine to carry, and if so, why?
- If I described a typical week at my job to a stranger, would it sound stable — or would it sound like survival?

WHAT'S NEXT

Recognizing chaos is step one. But knowing the signs doesn't always protect you from the moment it hits — the day everything changes with no warning at all. In Part 2, "The Day Everything Changed," you'll get the full story this series is built around: what happened when two employees showed up for a routine shift and found their entire workplace transformed overnight, with no explanation, no support, and no plan. You'll also get a practical framework for handling sudden, unexplained disruption at work — whether it's a merger, a restructuring, or simply a manager who vanishes when you need them most.

© Adapted from **Chaos Management: A Reflective Look at Workplace Burnout and Communication Challenges**. Part 1 of 3 in the *Chaos Management Companion Series*.

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