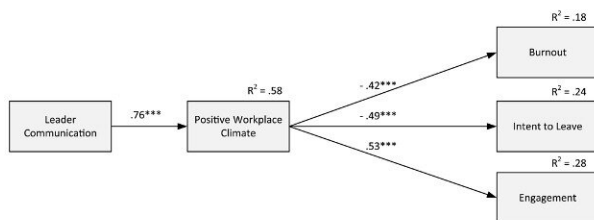


# Q&A: Positive leadership communication can be an effective tool to reduce worker burnout, turnover

July 11 2024, by JT Godfrey

## Positive Leadership in Breast Imaging: Burnout, Intent to Leave, and Engagement



- Prospective study of health care workers in a breast imaging unit to assess a positive leadership development program emphasizing communication.
- Pretest survey in 2021 (88 respondents) and posttest in 2023 (85 respondents) showed reduced burnout (pretest mean, 2.7 ± .9; posttest mean, 2.2 ± .7) and intent to leave (pretest mean, 3.1 ± 2.2; posttest mean, 2.6 ± 1.8) and improved engagement (pretest mean, 5.3 ± 1.2; posttest mean, 5.7 ± .9)
- Leadership communication was associated with a positive work climate ( $\beta = 0.76$ ), which subsequently was associated with engagement ( $\beta = 0.53$ ), intent to leave ( $\beta = -0.49$ ), and burnout ( $\beta = -0.42$ ).

Young AM et al. Published: May 14, 2024  
<https://doi.org/10.1148/radiol.232329>

Radiology

Credit: *Radiology* (2024). DOI: 10.1148/radiol.232329

Amy Young says it's "time to humanize" the places where we work.

The professor of teaching in business communications at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business adds that it's possible for bosses

to create a productive workforce while recognizing the humanity in their workers.

Young discusses her latest research exploring how improvements in leadership communication can remedy burnout, turnover, staffing shortages and other challenges facing the [health care industry](#).

**Your research on health care worker burnout is incredibly relevant, particularly now. What drew you to test the effectiveness of leadership communication?**

There was a clear need for interventions in health care, even before the pandemic. Existing approaches to addressing burnout and turnover primarily focused on reducing workloads, having more flexible work schedules, and increasing compensation, which makes sense, given that these factors were contributing to burnout and turnover.

Realistically, though, ongoing staff shortages and financial shortfalls in health care centers and hospitals have made it difficult to actually implement these approaches. These challenges reflect larger systemic problems and an ongoing crisis in the health care industry.

**In your study, "Positive leadership within breast imaging: Impact on burnout, intent to leave, and engagement," you designed and tested a training course for positive leadership. What were some of the key lessons you wanted to impart?**

It is time to humanize the workplace. If you look at recent [employee](#) surveys, you'll see that employees want a workplace where they can feel a sense of purpose and meaningful connections to others.

Yet, most workplace conversations are transactional and often focus primarily on relaying information that enables us to do our job: "Bring the paperwork." "Tell me how to calculate the estimates." "Let's move forward with this." We are concise, direct and clear in the workplace because "time is money."

As social beings, we are evolutionarily hardwired to need more from our interactions. Words and nonverbal gestures that convey to others that they are affirmed, valued and belong to the [social group](#) fulfill basic psychological needs.

The takeaway for leaders is that it's possible to create a productive workplace while simultaneously fulfilling these fundamental psychological needs. When leaders recognize the humanity in their employees, they earn exceptional engagement and unwavering loyalty.

**Your two recent studies primarily focused on the health care industry. Are there any other industries that could benefit from your positive leadership communication framework?**

I started working in health care prior to the pandemic because it was an industry most acutely affected by burnout and turnover. Now, most organizations are concerned about employee stress, mental health and [burnout](#). While the unique stressors may be different in other industries, this program centers around fulfilling the fundamental need to be affirmed, to belong, and to be valued by others. Any leader concerned about employee well-being could benefit from this training.

**Were there any particular levels of leadership that have more or less influence on making employees feel**

## valued?

Leaders at all levels affect whether employees feel valued. For supervisors and managers, it is often the day-to-day interactions that matter. For executives, they can learn to convey appreciation through communication channels such as blogs and videos. Understanding how to be honest, transparent and personable is essential.

Executives also need to be mindful of how some of their decisions affect employees throughout the organization. For example, a change in reporting structure or a new employment policy may inadvertently negatively impact employees. Without knowing it, executives can give the impression that they don't care about employees. Whether accurate or not, perception becomes reality within organizations. Having a good line of communication up and down the hierarchy helps avoid this.

## **For organizations struggling with employee burnout, what are the first things they should do to address these issues?**

If you haven't done so already, talk to employees about how they are doing. Employees are reluctant to share how they may be struggling out of fear it will reflect negatively on them, so they suffer in silence. So does their work productivity. Whether it's quiet quitting or active quitting, a struggling employee is less effective. This conversation makes sense not only out of compassion but also out of the need to maintain a productive workforce.

If you ask employees how they are doing, they may share how you could make a difference. Some suggestions you may be able to act on, while others may not be within your control. Even if you are not in a position to make a difference, follow up with the employee and be as transparent

as possible. Not following up will be interpreted that you do not care. Remember, perception becomes reality.

## **Do you have any upcoming research projects on burnout and leadership communication?**

There are a couple of next steps in the process that will hopefully begin this fall. I'm working on scaling the program so it can be brought to a wider audience while still maintaining its integrity.

I'm also interested in evaluating the impact of the program on [key performance indicators](#) that the leaders of the units focus on. In the health care community, these commonly include patient safety, outcomes and satisfaction. Caring for the people in an organization makes good business sense, but it helps leaders to see it empirically demonstrated to trust what they already know.

The exciting news is there are actually no-cost solutions [leaders](#) can use to improve the well-being of health care providers. While they can't address the larger challenges that plague the whole health care industry, they can improve the lives of health care workers who have made tremendous sacrifices over the past couple years.

**More information:** Amy M. Young et al, Positive Leadership within Breast Imaging: Impact on Burnout, Intent to Leave, and Engagement, *Radiology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1148/radiol.232329](https://doi.org/10.1148/radiol.232329)

Amy M. Young et al, A Focus on Leadership Communication and Feeling Valued to Prevent Burnout and Turnover Among Healthcare Professionals, *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine* (2024). [DOI: 10.1097/JOM.0000000000003057](https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0000000000003057)

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Q&A: Positive leadership communication can be an effective tool to reduce worker burnout, turnover (2024, July 11) retrieved 11 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-07-qa-positive-leadership-communication-effective.html>

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