Breaking the burnout cycle with positive interventions

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Burt Rea: Welcome to the Capital H podcast, where we explore the topics and trends associated with work, the workforce, and the workplace. I'm your host, Burt Rea.

Today's work environment presents a multitude of challenges—so naturally most of us feel a little stressed out from time to time. But when chronic stress builds and isn't managed, it can turn into employee burnout—with dire consequences for individuals and organizations alike. Even while many of us are now in new, virtual working environments, burnout can be a challenge.

How can organizations recognize the impending signs of burnout? And how can they help prevent it before it strikes? In this episode, we explore answers to these important questions with Elizabeth Linos, an impressive behavioral scientist and public management scholar. Elizabeth is an assistant professor of public policy at the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley.

My colleague, Jim Guszcza, the US chief data scientist for Deloitte Consulting, had a fantastic conversation with Elizabeth,

which you are about to hear. Elizabeth shares key findings from her research on behavioral insights and employee burnout. And she explains how practical interventions can address burnout and the negative health outcomes, high turnover, and poor organizational performance that come with it. I'm excited to share this conversation with you—I hope you enjoy!

Jim Guszcza: Hello, everybody. Welcome to our latest installment of the Capital H podcast, the first of our new year, 2020. Today's guest is someone I've known for a few years, Professor Elizabeth Linos. She's a professor of public policy at the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, former research director of the US branch at the Behavioral Insights Team, and just generally a rock star in the behavioral insights world. On a personal note, Elizabeth spoke at Deloitte's first annual Nudgeapalooza in the fall of 2016, and I've been a fan of hers since right around that time. I'm super, super delighted to have Elizabeth join us today, particularly given how interesting her current research is. Elizabeth, welcome. Would you like to say a few words to introduce yourself for the kind of work you're doing these days?

Elizabeth Linos: Thanks, Jim. I'm so happy to be here, and thank you for that very kind introduction. As you mentioned, I'm now at Berkeley, but the work that I'm doing really focuses on the same types of issues that I was working on at BIT, with a particular focus on people in government. I think of myself as a behavioral scientist who focuses on public management, but really most of my work is about how to recruit, retain, and support people in organizations. The work, I think, that I've been doing lately has focused on one subset of that process. That's employee burnout. I think a lot about burnout as a retention question. Why is it that people spend a lot of time getting jobs that require training, that require going through a rigorous recruitment and selection process, and then quit in the first two years? We see this a lot for teachers or social workers or other people who are working in high-stress environments. More broadly, when we think about burnout, we think about how that

might affect organizational performance, the services that people can deliver, and how burnout at work might affect broader burnout at home as well.

Jim: So retention and turnover is like the extreme case of an outcome of burnout, but there can be a lot of damaging effects of burnout even along the way, even if the person is still at work.

Elizabeth: That's right. We know, for example, that burnout is correlated with personal challenges, things like poor health, sleep deprivation, misuse of drugs, lots of potential personal challenges. Also at the organizational level, it is associated with higher levels of absenteeism, potentially lower performance—although that link is not super clear yet—and certainly turnover. If an organization cares about broader organizational performance, even if they're not thinking specifically about the mental health of their employees, they might be thinking about burnout as a broader challenge for the organization in terms of retention.

Jim: How do you define burnout? I think there's been some new interesting work coming out of the World Health Organization on how burnout is defined. You want to say a few words about that?

Elizabeth: Yeah, absolutely. Recently, the World Health Organization redefined burnout as an occupational phenomenon. It's essentially characterized by three concepts. The first is emotional exhaustion, feeling like you can't take it anymore, that just one more day at work is too much, feeling tired all the time or feeling like you don't have the energy to do the things that you used to do. The second area is what's called depersonalization. This is particularly important for people who interact with others, so if you think about frontline workers like teachers or humanitarian aid workers or 911 dispatchers, those employees depersonalize the people that they come into contact with when they have high levels of burnout. That can certainly have effects over time in terms of services delivered. Then the third category has to do with personal accomplishment, so feeling like

you can't meet the challenges that come your way or feeling like you're not going to be able to accomplish your goals.

What you'll note, Jim, is that a lot of these concepts do overlap with what we think about when we think about depression. There's some debate right now in the research community about whether or not the alarmingly high rates of burnout that we're observing in the workforce are actually because it's less of a stigma to talk about being burnt out at work than to say you have depression. We might be capturing all sorts of other related concepts when observed as burnout at work.

Jim: That's so interesting. I just want to emphasize this new World Health Organization definition. I think I read that it said the ICD-11, which is going to go live in 2022, in a couple of years—correct me if I'm wrong here—before this definition you just walked through, I think they just defined it in very vague terms as a state of vital exhaustion, this vague thing. Now we're getting much more granular about it. As you said, connecting it with other types of syndromes like depression, this seems like very recent progress. It's very important that before we can act on something and intervene, you have to understand what it is. Right?

Elizabeth: That's exactly right. I think redefining or recharacterizing burnout as an occupational phenomenon also means—and this is getting a little bit into the weeds—but it also means that the WHO can then put out guidelines about how to improve it. It also means that it then becomes a very clear public health consideration when we think about occupation. In the same way that the WHO can have rules about exposure to asbestos, or noise pollution, they're putting burnout in a category for which they can have rules and regulations, or at least guidelines coming out. I think it's really exciting to see people take burnout seriously. I don't know if you've seen, but also there are researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health that have posted recently around burnout for physicians. One of their major claims is that we should think

about physician burnout as a public health crisis or an epidemic. In the same way that we think about other types of public health epidemics, this is one where we need to start taking it more seriously at work if we are to reduce it over time, but also measure its impact on people and organizations.

Jim: Before we go on, when you talk about burnout, intuitively I think a burnout as being . . . If it were on a spectrum, it might be on the opposite end of the spectrum from employee engagement. Does that seem like a reasonable idea to you?

Elizabeth: That's a really good way of thinking about it. When you look at the questions that are used in validated scales of burnout, you'll see questions that really sound like the opposite of engagement questions. You'll see things like, "I feel less energized at work. I feel like I can't take it anymore. I don't feel excited about my work." Then when you read validated engagement survey questions, you'll see the opposite of that. You'll see questions around feeling really dedicated or feeling energetic or feeling like time flies when you're at work. In one sense, you can think of burnout as the opposite of employee engagement, but there's some really interesting studies that actually think about burnout as the extension of employee engagement. For some subset of the population, you actually see both high levels of burnout and high levels of passion at work. I think that makes sense as well. You can imagine an employee that's really excited, passionate about their work, giving it their all, and that leading to burnout over time. One thing that I think about in my work is how we can capture that motivation that people feel at work before it gets to burnout and help support people so that we don't lead to the overextension of employee engagement into the realm of the unhealthy, which is where I would put burnout.

Jim: Well, that's a great segue. The next thing I want to ask is, let's talk about your work in this domain. I think some of this is the motivation behind it. You just came out with a very interesting paper. Can you describe

some of your recent work in employee engagement and burnout?

Elizabeth: Sure. I should say that part of the reason I got into this space was because of this fundamental question that I mentioned earlier on: Why do we see a lot of people go into professions that it's hard to get into, where the training takes many months, often more than a year, and then they quit within the first couple of years? That, to me, is a conundrum in some sense. Actually, if you look across the policy spectrum, you'll see that in very different types of professions—social workers, teachers, police officers, 911 dispatchers—what all these professionals have in common is high levels of either trauma or secondary trauma in the work. You'll see this with nurses and physicians as well.

I started studying this question looking at 911 dispatchers. Now, 911 dispatchers are a really interesting part of law enforcement. On the one hand, their job almost definitionally entails a lot of trauma and secondary trauma. They're the people who are picking up the phone every time someone calls the cops. If you imagine that there is some stress or some trauma associated with being a police officer that takes a call and goes to someone's house and witnesses violence, the 911 dispatcher is essentially doing that, minute after minute, for hundreds of calls every day. It's no wonder to me that 911 dispatchers not only exhibit really high levels of burnout, but also have very high levels of absenteeism and turnover. Now, in parallel to that nature of the work, they're also relatively undervalued. If you think about the social hierarchy in law enforcement, 911 dispatchers often don't get a lot of credit for the work that they do. What that means is, if there is, for example, a mass shooting or a major event in the city, the firefighters, the police officers, and others are going to get a lot of mental health services, a lot of days off. The 911 dispatchers are considered a call center, so they actually just have to go back to work.

Jim: Right.

Elizabeth: I started this work because I thought about, what is it about feeling valued or feeling like people understand what you go through that might impact your levels of burnout, even when you know the work itself can't change—the work itself is, by definition, difficult and high-stress? What is it about the environment in which you have to perform those duties that might affect levels of burnout?

Jim: That's a nuance that was lost on me when I read your paper, Elizabeth. It sounds like you actually chose that population to study, the 911 dispatchers, because they're sort of the hidden heroes. They really are some of the first responders, but they might be thought of as being call center operators and therefore they feel undervalued or they don't feel recognized for their contributions.

Elizabeth: Yeah, I think that's right. It affects how we thought about the intervention itself. I can tell you a little bit about that as well.

The fundamental characteristic here is exactly what you described, that they are somehow the unsung heroes or the undervalued part of this whole process that we call law enforcement. In my work, I theorize that that's actually really important. If you feel misunderstood or undervalued, you're going to have higher levels of burnout, even if you're doing similar work in practice. We find that in a bunch of surveys. We can correlate higher levels of burnout with lower levels of feeling understood and valued. That's a starting point for thinking about a potential solution.

What we ended up doing with nine cities across the US, in collaboration with the Behavioral Insights Team, is creating an adjusted peer support program, essentially, that nudged workers to reflect on how important they are, not to citizens or to people who are calling, but to each other. The idea there is that, yes, okay, society doesn't fully understand what you do, but other 911 dispatchers do. The nudges essentially asked questions like, "What would you tell a newbie about this job?" or "What advice would you give to someone who's

starting in this profession?" The idea was not only to increase the professional status of this group, but also to create a sense of connectedness amongst 911 dispatchers.

In the same way, for example, the police officers . . . Even if you've never met a police officer from another city, for example, you have a sense that you are connected—you bleed blue—or you have a sense of a common professional identity. We wanted to create that amongst the 911 dispatchers in these nine cities. What we ended up doing is, we sent emails. Of course, this is a field experiment. Half the 911 dispatchers got weekly emails for a period of six weeks. Then we measured burnout levels immediately after the intervention, and then four months later, using a validated scale. We supplemented that with administrative data on their behavior. We also could look at things like resignations and turnover over the same period. What we found was actually pretty stark movements, both on burnout and turnover.

Four months after these emails stopped coming, so six months after we started the intervention, we see an eight-point reduction in burnout on the validated scale. We also cut resignations by more than half. That is almost too good to be true. Such a large effect. What that says to me is that we should continue to study this process. No academic would ever say that just based on one study, we've figured this out. But it does suggest that there's something about social connectedness and social belonging that impacts burnout and, importantly, that that relationship might be causal.

Jim: That's so interesting, and that is a huge effect size. I guess that we're more likely to believe in that effect size if there is a strong underlying theory motivating this. In this case, I believe there was a very strong underlying theory motivating your intervention. Is that right?

Elizabeth: Yeah. Both before and after this specific field experiment, we've done a lot more tests to check whether or not that that kind of theoretical mechanism holds true. We've checked, for example, recently,

with some online workers using MTurk to see whether or not we can get the same effect. Can we prime people to think about how they can support each other at work or how they would support a new person at work, and how does that impact their levels of burnout? We focus on people who have other jobs outside of MTurk, so people who have full-time employment elsewhere. We find the same effect. We can find the same theoretical mechanism captured in other samples, which suggests that this might be a real thing. We've also done some work recently with correctional officers, and we're starting some work with social workers, to measure the same theoretical mechanisms. The first preliminary results with correctional officers suggests that even in environments where burnout is very high—and it's alarming how high burnout rates can get in some of the places that I work—if you feel understood by the leadership and by society, and if you feel like you belong, your burnout rates are lower. And so that is also kind of in line with what we found in the experiment.

Jim: Right. That's one thing that interests me about your experiment is that, as you pointed out, the intervention was to get 911 dispatchers to recognize one another, even if they're still collectively the sort of unsung heroes. And it still had that kind of effect, which is just fascinating. Do you think it would be even stronger if it were possible to create an intervention that nudged, say, police officers, or members of the media, or people higher up in government, to recognize these folks?

Elizabeth: Yeah. So I'm also fascinated by that. I'm not sure, so let me give you an analogous scenario where there is some evidence, and that's in education psychology.

So a lot of people are thinking about, how do we get more women in STEM fields, in science and technology and math? And there's some really cool research on what's called the chilly climate, which means if you are a woman in a male-dominated field, like a STEM field, there might be something about the climate in which you are doing your academic work that is "chilly." It's not very

welcoming, it's not very supportive, people don't really understand why you're there, etc. Now there are two ways you can think about fixing that. Option one, you try to create an intervention that encourages more kind of social cohesion, or more kind of support, where the women hang out more with the men, right? And then you kind of build the sense that we're all in this together.

An alternative approach, which has actually been shown to work quite well, is to strengthen the social cohesion amongst the women who are there. So that approach says, "Forget the men, they're never going to understand why we're here. Why don't we strengthen our own internal networks so that we can have the same levels of social support that men get naturally?" So that's kind of my thinking on this as well.

But yes, in an ideal world, if we could significantly increase the value associated with these jobs, maybe we would have lower levels of burnout overall. But it's not necessary to change the overall culture to be able to strengthen social support networks, as long as you have enough people that can build that social connectedness and support that process.

Jim: And that seems like a real headline, Elizabeth. Seriously. I mean, intuitively, when I walked into this podcast, I was thinking that that would ultimately be what you want to do is—I mean, maybe you do, but that'd be ultimately necessary—is to get people on the outside of the community to recognize the contributions that people inside the community. And it seems that what your research suggests is that, well, we can actually make a lot of progress just by kind of increasing the affirmation within that community. That's really very, very powerful.

Elizabeth: Yeah, and I don't know if it's because of my research or because of just the way I think. Since I've started doing this work, you actually see this approach being used in the wild often. So if you think about which parts of Facebook are still actually on the rise and not dwindling, it's these groups, these professional secret groups—which

aren't secret anymore—but these groups of academic moms that all talk to each other, or veteran moms that always talk to each other in someone's . . . Those groups create a community that is defined by being marginalized in some way.

But within that group, you have a community of people who you may never meet, but who you feel connected to in some way. You feel like you belong in that community, and you feel comfortable, both asking for advice and sharing experiences. So in some ways, we see that people do create these types of communities naturally when they need systems of support.

What we don't have, and what my research tries to do, is real quantitative evidence that this has an impact, right? And so my research is really about taking some of these processes and measuring very rigorously, and very quantitatively, what that means in terms of things like burnout and absenteeism, but also things like decision-making and service delivery. So other types of outcomes as well.

Jim: And it kind of ratifies things that might otherwise seem just kind of hazy and maybe not quite so real among certain people, they . . . In the same way that the World Health Organization is actually trying to get us in the direction to be able to quantify and really diagnose this kind of occupational phenomenon of employee burnout. What your research is reminding us is that even people who are intrinsically motivated to serve the public, like teachers and nurses and 911 dispatchers and so on, they need to be valued. They need to be recognized, too. That's a really important human need. Yes, they're trying to help the public, but they have needs themselves, and it seems that that can be forgotten.

Elizabeth: Yeah, absolutely. And this is true in a lot of my other research as well. Public service motivation, this idea that you're motivated by helping people, is so central to how we think about the public sector that it's almost become taboo to say that you're motivated by anything else. And what I think that has done is, actually, I think that's created a disservice for public-sector

employees where, because they're there for the children, or they're there to help the poor, or they're there to support people in vulnerable situations, the world has told them that that should be enough, that they don't need anything else in order to be motivated and go to work. But for a lot of other types of organizations and people, we take it for granted that you also have to be rewarded well financially, and you need a boss that tells you that you're doing something well or gives you feedback that's actionable.

So all these elements of good management have almost been left aside in the public sector, because there's been this emphasis on public-sector motivation. And I think what we're finding with this research is that even people who really want to make a difference in the world, who really are kind of there for the right reasons and took these jobs for the right reasons, might need extra levels of support in order to continue to do their work well.

Jim: And your focus has been on public sector. I wonder, how generalizable is this thinking for other types of organizations, like, say, the pool of administrative assistants working in a law firm, or the pool of IT support staff working in a big consulting firm? Could other organizations in the private sector, or at least not necessarily the public sector, benefit from this kind of research?

Elizabeth: So I think the answer is yes. And actually, that's something that I'm studying and will continue to study. If my theory is right, those sometimes unwritten rules, or kind of vague social hierarchies that exist in any type of organization, should have an impact on something like burnout.

So for example, both in the private sector and the public sector, you see really high levels of nurse burnout. And nurses have a very specific, incredibly important role in health systems, but they often are not valued as much as physicians. And so there's a question there about . . . is what I find in law enforcement the same as what you would find with nurses, vis-à-vis doctors, administrative assistants, vis-à-vis consultants? There's all these social

hierarchies and organizations that we need to understand better to think about burnout.

And I think the answer is yes, right? So there's a couple of kind of main findings across a series of studies that I've done. One is that if you feel like you're misunderstood, or that people don't value you at work, your levels of burnout are higher. And the second is, that if you strengthen people's sense of social belonging and connectedness, or you affirm that they do have a community of people that do understand what they're going through, their burnout levels go down. And so those two factors could exist in any type of work environment, right? There's a question about whether it's worse in certain areas or whether it's exacerbated by the type of work that you do.

So for example, correctional officers face incredible levels of violence in their day-to-day work. Social workers who work with very vulnerable populations often report really high levels of secondary trauma. So it's possible that the effects are larger, or the challenges are somewhat more different, if the nature of the work itself lends itself to higher levels of burnout. But I do think the fundamental message that we're getting out of these studies applies across a whole bunch of different types of organizations.

Jim: Sure. That people need to feel valued, they shouldn't be undervalued, and they should have some kind of a social belonging, otherwise they're at risk of burnout.

Elizabeth: Absolutely.

Jim: That does seem like news we can use, because these . . . And as we've said, the interventions that you're exemplifying with your research are very practical. They're very lightweight, low-cost interventions. I think they're probably practically free, given how much money you'd save, at least for the 911 dispatchers, right?

Elizabeth: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, this is the beauty of a lot of behavioral science. And I don't want to say that all of behavioral science has to be a low-cost, low-tech nudge. But certainly a promise of a lot of these types of interventions is that the nature of

the solution is disproportionately smaller than the size of the problem.

Jim: At last year's Nudgeapalooza, our keynote speaker was George Loewenstein. And the theme of his talk was, sometimes nudges are not enough. And sometimes if the message gets out there that all you need is a lightweight, inexpensive intervention, sometimes you can kind of avoid dealing with situations that need more serious interventions or serious surgeries. You don't want to put a Band-Aid on a wound that needed surgery, is kind of the gist of it.

And so we want to, I guess, remind ourselves that while interventions like this are extremely valuable, and they pay for themselves many times over, I can imagine other situations where there might be such toxic environments that you need . . . You don't want to just do something lightweight and say, "High-five, we're done." You might need more serious interventions as well, I can imagine.

Elizabeth: Yeah, I think that's a really important point. And actually, some research of mine that's going to come out in the next year really focuses on the limits of nudges, so thinking about how the community of behavioral scientists, and also behavioral enthusiasts, have gotten excited about this idea that really the next wave of behavioral science is going to have to be a lot more nuanced about what we think we can accomplish with a nudge versus with a more in-depth intervention.

In the burnout space, I think that there's a very clear analogy, right? So we're looking at additional effects, or marginal effects, of a very specific intervention. But there's no doubt that in the workplaces that I usually study, things like low pay and terrible hours and lack of autonomy and lack of resources are fundamental to the challenge, right?

It would be really problematic if the main message coming out of my studies is, "You don't have to fix the work conditions, you don't have to fix the hours, you just have to make people feel like they belong." That's not what I'm saying at all. I'm just saying, in

an environment where the work hours are bad, and the pay is bad, and you're facing a lot of violence or trauma, even in those environments, people have very different levels of burnout.

And so understanding, in these high-stress, high-demand environments, what causes higher levels or lower levels of burnout—so just potential solutions that are immediate—that doesn't take away from the fundamental structural solutions that we all need to be working toward when we think about better work environments.

Jim: Exactly. Well said, well said. Any other thoughts on other types of kind of behavioral or equally motivated interventions that could improve employee engagement or reduce employee burnout? Do you have any other kind of thoughts about that?

Elizabeth: Yeah, so there's many potential avenues that you could take. So one avenue that I've been taking my work has to do with social connectedness and social belonging. There's a very different type of avenue that's more individualized. So there are a lot of people thinking about what it means to create the time and space for closure, when traumatic events happen at work, that you might think about mindfulness interventions that have been proven to be very effective. You might think about journaling, a lot of more individual-based interventions. Mindfulness in particular actually has a very strong evidence base at this point around reducing stress. So that's certainly another area that people have looked into. There's other types of efforts when it comes to both the engagement space and the burnout space that do also use the fact that you, when you're interacting with people . . . knowing the impact of your work might matter. So I'm sure you'll know of Adam Grant's early work that looks at, if you see the impact on the beneficiary of your work, that might improve performance. You could imagine something similar on things like burnout.

So there are a lot of efforts, and some of those studies I'm starting now. But look at if you could tell people about the impact

of their work, or what happens to a case after it left your hands, that that might also help people cope with trauma, or help people cope with the day-to-day difficulties of their work. So I think we're still really at the beginning of understanding solutions. One thing that I think surprised me when I got into this work is that we've actually been documenting a steady rise in burnout over the past few years. So we know it's a real thing. We know the rates are getting alarmingly high when we don't actually have a really strong evidence base about what to do about it, partly because randomized control trials are hard. They're hard in these environments. And so we're only starting to develop that evidence base about what to do in these situations and to find potential solutions. But I'm certain that in the next five years, we'll see a huge increase in really rigorous studies that ask this question and find solutions that are feasible and scalable on questions of burnout and engagement.

Jim: Why do you think that burnout is going up over time, in recent years?

Elizabeth: Yeah, that's a very good question. So I think one thing that is particularly important is this idea of just a change in reporting. So if we think about people's levels of comfort with talking about anything around mental health, you can imagine an increase in reported burnout is partly due to an increase in comfort reporting burnout. So that's one part.

We do find, across all my studies, but also more broadly in the literature, that younger people are reporting higher levels of burnout. So there's two potential explanations there. One is, younger people are more comfortable with mental health questions, and so they're more comfortable reporting levels of burnout. The second, and this is controversial, is that expectations about work have shifted. And so older cohorts or older generations didn't expect to have meaningfulness coming out of their work. And if newer generations do, you can imagine the clash between those expectations and the reality of work really creating the conditions for which burnout emerges. I don't know if that's true. We're

still trying to figure that out, but it's very clear that, across a whole bunch of different occupational environments that we have been studying, that the rates are going up. Now the third explanation is that things are just getting worse, right?

Jim: Right.

Elizabeth: On that bright note. Yeah. It's possible that in some of these professions—and again, I'm talking about the public sector, because that's what I studied—but this applies in a lot of different situations.

Let's imagine that, a generation ago, you had a lot more perks or benefits associated with the public-sector employee and your retirement and your savings. Those things have now gone away. That might affect levels of burnout in a real way, like financial instability and stress are obviously related to levels of burnout. It could also be that the changing nature of how we think about public servants makes a difference. If it is true that we . . . the media or the news or society is changing their perceptions about government bureaucrats—we hear words like the deep state, or words about the bureaucrats being lazy—

Jim: Yeah.

Elizabeth: If the perception of the work is changing, that could also affect people's ability to handle the stresses that come their way. We don't yet know what's happening. What we do know is that the rates are getting alarmingly high.

Jim: You and I have talked in the past about, this is an interesting next wave for behavioral insights. It's made a big splash in the past decade in the public sector. You're certainly doing work in the public sector, but there's this interesting segue to HR more generally. It used to be that HR is all about treating humans like humans, and behavioral sciences give us a lot more insights in recent decades about what motivates us. We sort of ignore that at our peril.

Elizabeth: You're right that over the past 10 years, we've essentially seen an

explosion of behavioral science related to government. The majority of that explosion has to do with what I call nudging outward. So it's governments using concepts from behavioral science to nudge residents to change their behavior. What my work does at the People Lab is thinks about nudging inward. How do we use the same principles of behavioral science to improve internal organization working, public-sector employees, but also employees in general? Thinking about using those tools on our own practices in some sense. I do see a willingness and an interest in that space. So I do expect that in the next few years, we'll see a lot more evidence in the behavioral science world in this HR space.

Jim: That's great. When you talk to people in HR about nudge, it seems to . . . I almost think, sometimes, the tagline takes on a life of its own, the tagline wags the dog, like a bad pun. Where people might think that nudge just means, "Oh, we'll send them a little reminder," nudge them to fill out the form or something like that. That could just be a lot of emails piling up. It's really a much deeper topic than that. It really is kind of like—your work is a great example of this—understanding what motivates people, and if there are things that are short-circuiting that, remove those barriers. Make it easier for people to function more on the job.

Elizabeth: Yeah. I think you've said that exactly right. If we're doing our job well, we're really trying to understand that underlying human psychology, exactly as you said. We're trying to understand what gets people up in the morning and what convinces them to apply for that job or convinces them to take that leap and apply for a promotion. All these questions have a behavioral component to them. There's no reason why we can't study them using behavioral insights and experimental tools. Sometimes organizations start introducing behavioral science concepts with the lowest-hanging fruit, like how can we literally remind people, through a well-crafted reminder, to take up some sort of service, or to fill in their time sheets, whatever the case may be? The concepts themselves are much deeper than that. My sense is that if we

really want to understand workers and work environments, we have to get to that level of understanding of what motivates humans. That's really what behavioral science is.

Jim: Well, I think that's a pretty amazing note to end on, Elizabeth. The future of work is being characterized by a lot of new technologies being introduced into workplaces. I think that along with that, you're working, and this discussion is a reminder, that alongside the new technologies, we need to really understand the human that's going to work alongside those technologies and tap into those human motivations. Thank you so much for this conversation and for your research.

Elizabeth: Yeah, thank you, Jim. I'm excited to see how this field develops, but thank you for taking the time, and looking forward to getting feedback.

Jim: Great. It's a pleasure.

Burt: Burnout is certainly becoming an increasingly important challenge in modern workplaces. And it is a concept that has many nuances and implications—which Elizabeth shed light on. I hope you found her presentation to be informative and thought-provoking; I certainly did. Thank you again to Elizabeth Linos and Jim Guszcza for joining us on today's episode. Please join us next time on the Capital H podcast as we dive into more topics and trends that focus on putting humans at the center of work.
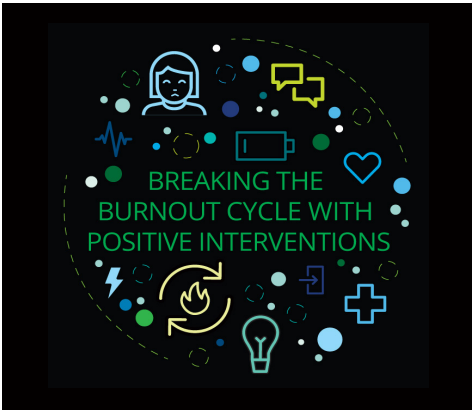
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