

# Coaching as Instrument to Identity and Remedy for Boreout Syndrome with Employees

Helene Moris

*Higher School of Economics (HSE)  
National Research University  
Moscow, Russia*

Anastasia B. Nedosugova\*

*Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University)  
Moscow, Russia*

**Abstract**-Employees often do not like their job and are not interested to change, as they are bored. This has a material adverse effect on their wellbeing, job and relationship with manager. This paper analysis in which way coaching can be used in remedying the so called “boreout syndrome” and provides guidelines on how managers and employees can use this method. This paper includes an outcome of survey conducted amongst managers and employees on which existing methods they apply when facing boreout syndrome. The findings of our survey show that coaching provides a sustainable result for the employee.

**Keywords**-*boreout syndrome, coaching, overcome boreout, wellbeing*

## I. INTRODUCTION

People normally spend most of their time at work and how they feel, behave and interact at work has a big influence on how they behave in their free time. In today's world everything is going at a very fast pace and people are encouraged and socially obliged to react very fast. An impression is created that who is not busy with something can not be considered nor be an important member of society.

Therefore, employees are often pretending to look busy so that they would be considered important. But very often, they are actually not really busy. On the contrary, they are understretched (this includes the feeling that you could do more than is being asked of you), unmotivated and bored with the job. Here we speak about the so-called boreout syndrome.

It is clear that such situation is not positive for the employee nor for the employer and both parties should be interested in overcoming such situation. But it is not always so evident.

In this article we will describe the boreout syndrome and consider ways to remedy the syndrome as well as the role of coaching in the search for means of remedy.

## II. WHAT IS BOREOUT SYNDROME?

The boreout syndrome received attention after 2000 by already several authors. The frequently mentioned authors are in their kind management consultants: Peter Werder and Philippe Rotlin, both Swiss citizens published in 2007 their book: “Boreout! Overcoming workplace demotivation” [1].

According to them, the absence of meaningful tasks, rather than the presence of stress, is many employees' main problem. Boreout consists of three elements: boredom, lack of challenge, and lack of interest. Those suffering from boreout are “dissatisfied with their professional situation” in which they are frustrated at being prevented, by institutional mechanisms or obstacles as opposed to by their own lack of aptitude, from fulfilling their potential and/or from receiving official recognition for their efforts.

Consequences of boreout for employees include dissatisfaction, fatigue as well as apathy and low self-esteem, while for the business itself there are the problems of an unnecessary financial burden, high levels of sick leave and low company loyalty.

### A. *What do Boreout and Burnout Have in Common and What is Different?*

According to Peter Werder and Philippe Rotlin, boreout and burnout are closely connected, “although boreout is the opposite of burnout. People who suffer from burnout are stressed, have too much work and push themselves to the point of collapse for the company and for their work. For people affected by boreout, the word “stress” does not exist, they are very far away from having to give something of themselves to their work in any way.

What burnout and boreout have in common, are the many obvious symptoms, which are due to their unsatisfactory situations in the workplace. We can actually compare them with the Yin-Yang type considering their relationship to each other and how they mutually influence each other. When we consider a team consisting of a manager and his employees, we can say that the behavior of the person affected by burnout influences the behavior of the people affected by boreout. The stress of those suffering from burnout entails boredom for the boreout group, and vice versa.

### B. *Boreout Elements and Its Development*

According to Peter Werder and Philippe Rotlin, the boreout syndrome consists of 3 elements:

- *Being understretched*: this happens when the level of productivity of work demanded by the company does not match the employees' capabilities.

- *Lack of commitment*: here the employee feels dissociated from work and employer. They no longer care.
- *Boredom*: the employee feels no inner urge to do anything [1].

Here it is very much worth to connect this to the Flow theory from Csikszentmihalyi Michaly [2]. He outlines in his theory that people are happiest when they are in a state of *flow*— a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand and the situation. It is a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. To achieve a state of Flow, a balance must be struck between the challenge of the task and the skill of the performer. If the task is too easy or too difficult, flow cannot occur. Both skill level and challenge level must be matched and high; if skill and challenge are low and matched, then apathy results.

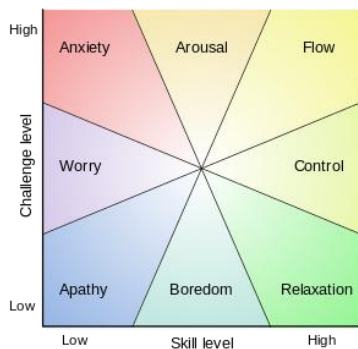


Figure 1. Flow Theory - Csikszentmihalyi Michaly

The boreout development does not happen overnight but when the feeling is continuing for a long time and the employee begins to notice that something is not as it should be: they are seldom challenged, and the moments of boredom pile up, every day they feel uncomfortable when they travel to work, the idea of having to spend the whole day in the office is not appealing to them. The employees' performance starts to become below expected level and the employee starts to use escapist behavioural strategies and to hold work at arm's length, because they are slowly but surely losing their motivation.

### C. Boreout Strategies

Even if an employee has very little work to do, s/he gives appearance of "looking busy". This is the strategy they use in order to cover up for their being not busy. Here I would like to mention the following strategies (P. Werder's and P. Rothlin "Boreout! Overcoming workplace demotivation"):

- *"document strategy"*- ensuring that a work-related document is open on one's computer and pretend you are working;
- *"the briefcase strategy and home-office link"*- carrying briefcases (whether empty or loaded) from work to home and back) and working from home creating the image that the company is so important to them that they even work in their free time;

- *"pseudo-commitment strategy"*- employee comes to work earlier in the morning and leaves later in the evening, creating the impression of having a lot to do;
- *"the compromise - strategy"*- the goal here is to get a task done as quickly as possible in order to easily beat a deadline set by the boss, who does not know that the work had already been completed. Why? So the employee has enough time before the actual deadline to turn to personal interests;
- *"the Levelling-out strategy"*- hereby the work is distributed over a longer period than is actually needed to do the job';
- *"the pseudo-burnout strategy"*- here the employee behaves himself as if they have a lot to do and they cannot handle another task [1].

Such strategies are also described by S. McKeivitt, professor of brand communication at Leeds Beckett University: "We live in the age of the city slacker: a new breed of urban professional who understands that the rules of business have changed and that to survive and prosper, you don't have to do your job well, you just need to look like you're doing it well. Your success depends upon how good you are at pulling off this performance and demands that you take every opportunity you can to be seen that you are doing the job" [3].

### III. WHY DOES A BOREOUT OCCUR?

There are several reasons a boreout might occur. Philippe Rothlin and Peter Werder note that a boreout is unlikely to occur in many non-office jobs where the employee must focus on finishing a specific task (e.g., a surgeon) or helping people in need (e.g., a childcare worker or nanny). In terms of group processes, it may well be that the boss or certain forceful or ambitious individuals with the team take all the interesting work leaving only a little of the most boring tasks for the others. Alternatively, the structure of the organization may simply promote this inefficiency. Of course, nobody wants to be fired, so the vast majority is unwilling and unlikely to call attention to what is going on [1].

### IV. WHO IS SENSITIVE TO A BOREOUT?

According to many researchers, people who allow themselves to be led in their professional life by fear and by what others expect from them are more subject to a boreout. Reorganizations, long term tasks/goals and not enough variety at work are also main risk factors. There is a specific category of people 'High-sensation-seeking-people', they are called and they need a lot of sensations/happening around. When they do not get such high sensation, those people are faster subject to a boreout. Also highly intelligent people will be bored if they do not get the needed challenges. In fact, it is the same kind of people who are also easily subject to a burnout.

We conducted a survey amongst 20 managers and 50 employees working for international companies, such as IKEA, Red Bull company and Cisco Systems in Moscow, Russian Federation.

The aim was to identify the obstacles the employee has in discussing the boreout with his manager and the following questions were hereby asked:

- which methods the employee is aware of, which can be used to remedy the boreout;
- which methods can be used by the manager to remedy the boreout;
- the difficulties the manager comes across when applying methods to remedy boreout;
- the role of employee, the manager and HR department in overcoming the boreout symptoms.

We identified as outcome of survey that there are several approaches to remedy a boreout. Many employees believe that it is the manager's responsibility to take action and to secure as manager that his employees are motivated and at the right job. Yes, this is also part of their responsibility and you can see many efforts done by managers (performance/evaluation talks, development talks, delegations of interesting tasks, daily contact with employees, weekly department meetings, team building events). But the managers' actions would remain useless if the employee himself is not aware of the boreout and does not feel the responsibility for his own behavior, actions and feelings.

We noticed that there is a mismatch between the ownership of the responsibility on who should take the first step, the employee or the manager.

The survey showed that neither managers nor employees have been considering Coaching as a possible tool to remedy boreout syndrome.

Therefore, it is our opinion that some other tool in the field of Coaching is needed on top of what a good manager might undertake in his management style.

Consequently, we decided to investigate how Coaching can be used in bringing the employee to the awareness of a boreout and how it can help the employee to create a sustainable remedy plan himself.

The creation of awareness is not an easy process. Often, the relevant person is not willing/able to accept the truth/real situation when s/he is told about it by another person. As a result of such discussion, rejection of accepting the real situation is often observed and no long term sustainable actions could be agreed and anchored.

In this case, coaching can be of a great assistance. A Coach can help the employee to get to realize the situation he/she is in. It speaks for itself that the employee should be voluntarily working with a coach; he can not be forced, as in

such cases the person is not activating his internal search for solutions how to get out of the situation.

The following existing methods have been evaluated and can be recommended to be used:

- *The Neurological Pyramid, P. Dilts*: used to realize that actions are based on skills, opinions, values and ultimately on self-identification. When using this method, a change in opinions/values and self-identification may occur, which will be the supportive factor, underlining the sound base of a future change of behaviors [4].



Figure 2. Neurological Pyramid, R. Dilts

- *The Circle of Influence, S. Covey*: by changing the perception on the job content, the same job does not become boring anymore. The employee comes to an awareness stage where he can see that the positive energy/ motivation lies within the influence zone and not so much within the job content [5].

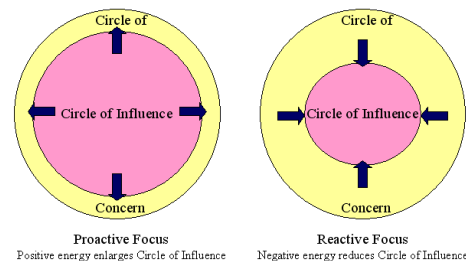


Figure 3. Circle of Influence, S. Covey.

- *Perma Model, M. Seligman*: when realizing that happiness is not only coming from the job content and even your own opinion towards job content can be changed to a more positive view, the coachee becomes aware on the actions he can take while working on himself. So, he is changing his inner perception and not spending his energy on fighting/being bored with the job content [6].



Figure 4. Perma Model, M. Seligman

## V. CONCLUSION

When investigating if coaching can be useful to remedy boreout syndrome, it became clear that through working on the values and self-perception of a person, the employee gets higher awareness on the “why” he should anticipate change and his acceptance level hereby increases.

It is also demonstrated that a person is most happy when he can work in a state of “flow”.

The most sustainable outcome for the employee can be reached by 1) focusing on the influence zone and not the work load zone, 2) working with Happiness during coach session and, 3) working with energy level/category during coach session.

This has as a result that the action plan is very much anchored by the employee as he focuses on his inner needs and on the positive sites of a given situation and on how he

can himself, with full awareness and responsibility use the right energy to realize his action plan.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The publication has been prepared with the support of the «RUDN University Program 5-100».

## REFERENCES

- [1] Rothlin P. & Werder P., Boreout: overcoming workplace demotivation, London: Kogan page, 2009.
- [2] Csikszentmihalyi Mihaly, Beyond boredom and Anxiety: experiencing flow in work and play. New York: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- [3] McKeivitt, Steve, Busy doing nothing. London: The Guardian. 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2006/may/13/careers.work3>
- [4] Robert Brian Dilts, From Coach to Awakener. San Francisco: Dilts Strategy Group, 2017.
- [5] Sean Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change. New York: Simon & Schuster; Updated edition, 2014.
- [6] Seligman M., A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being. New York: Published by Free Press, 2011.