CSIRT Management: Fighting Burnout

by M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP
Associate Professor, Information Assurance
Norwich University, Northfield VT

MSIA < http://www.graduate.norwich.edu/infoassurance/ > graduate student Mani Akella is back with another contribution to computer security incident response team (CSIRT) management. His original essay was longer and more scholarly than we could use in a column, so I’ve worked extensively with him to rewrite and edit it into a form and style that would fit our needs.

* * *

Do you ever feel that work has stopped being fun and is an oppressive chore? Do you overreact to minor problems or express unreasonable irritation with colleagues and customers? Do you worry about work when you’re at home? Are you tired and undermotivated? Do you find yourself feeling aches and pains or logging in sick more than you used to?

You may be suffering _occupational burnout_ as defined by industrial psychologists.< http://vocationalpsychology.com/term_burnout.htm >

CSIRT members often experience high stress because of the unpredictability of their work and the pressure to resolve critical issues quickly. Ideally, individuals can learn to recognize signs of stress and ask for help before they reach burnout – much as martial arts students take a break if they feel overwhelmed during a competition or a practice session. However, managers have to identify signs of employee stress and must resolve the issues to prevent serious problems.< http://www.rwkenterprises.com/Burnout.htm >

Unfortunately, it is not always easy to spot the signs of impending burnout. Employees may hide their feelings for fear of being ridiculed as weak or losing their job for being a non-performer. Managers may never have been trained to pay attention to symptoms of burnout or the management culture may not emphasize concern for individual employees. Line managers may not want to escalate stress problems because, ironically, in a poorly-managed enterprise, such concerns may be seen as poor management.

A CSIRT Mani worked with in one of his consulting assignments had a 38-year old CSIRT member who died from heart attack that was squarely blamed on increased stress levels. Since then, managers in the information systems, information assurance and human resources (HR) sectors have participated in intense education and training to recognize and respond to employee stress. Employees in high-intensity jobs are being given better managed and longer vacations to help recover from work-related stress.

The following list of effective antiburnout measures will be useful to readers and may stimulate discussion; perhaps a brown-bag lunch session with HR managers would be helpful:

1) Managers should learn about the problem and its effect on overall business objectives.
2) The organization should promote open communication about feelings of stress.
3) Managers should monitor and resolve personal conflicts among their staff members.
4) Employees need to significant freedom in their work and schedule and some autonomy and control over their job function to promote a sense of ownership and responsibility.
5) Managers must reappraise and resolve unreasonable budgets and inappropriate staffing levels.
6) Managers must support employee efforts and provide recognition for good work.
7) Managers should avoid creating star employees; such employees can feel overwhelmed by unreasonable expectations and can suffer from resentments of their peers.
8) Employees need to take their personal leave and to receive proper employment benefits that recognize their contributions to the organization.

For Further Reading

- Malasch Burnout Inventory - http://epm.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/48/3/579

* * *

Mani Akella, CISSP is President and Technical Director at Consultantgurus, a Bridgewater, NJ organization focused on providing information assurance and surveillance services to its clients. He can be reached via e-mail at <mani@consultantgurus.com>. His personal blog is at <http://akellamani.blogspot.com>.

M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP is Program Director of the Master of Science in Information Assurance <http://www.graduate.norwich.edu/infoassurance/> and CTO of the School of Graduate Studies at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. Mich can be reached by e-mail at <mailto:mekabay@gmail.com>; Web site at <http://www.mekabay.com/index.htm>.

Copyright © 2007 Mani Akella & M. E. Kabay. All rights reserved.

Permission is hereby granted to Network World to distribute this article at will, to post it without limit on any Web site, and to republish it in any way they see fit.