Quiet Quitting – Causes and Opportunities

Thalmus Mahand[1] & Cam Caldwell[1]

[1] College of Business and Public Affairs, Alabama A & M University, USA

Correspondence: Cam Caldwell, College of Business and Public Affairs, Alabama A & M University, USA.

Abstract

According to a recent Wall Street Journal article, 50% of today's workforce have chosen to limit their commitment to their jobs. "Quiet Quitting" is the current term that defines ceasing to be fully committed to one's job and doing just enough to meet the requirements of one's job description. This paper outlines how the root cause of the decline of employee commitment lies with the failure of many managers and supervisors to honor their fundamental leadership responsibilities required to engage, empower, and inspire employees with whom they work. Finally, we outline practical steps that companies can use to reengage their employees and increase employee commitment.

Keywords: employee commitment, employees, Quiet Quitting

1. Introduction

In the wake of a recent *Wall Street Journal* article that reported that fully 50% of today's employees have chosen to limit their commitment to their jobs (Smith, 2022), a barrage of information has surfaced about the "quiet quitting" phenomenon and its impact on the competitive advantage of companies (Hare, 2022). Pundits in the press and academic scholars alike decry the alleged lack of motivation of Millennial and Generation Z workers (Terry, 2022; Dashevsky, 2020). However, the quiet quitting movement can also be explained as an attempt by a growing percentage of employees to communicate to employers that the workplace environment is no longer healthy for employees and needs to change (Ellis & Yang, 2022).

The compelling research from Gallup has made it evident that a root cause in the decline of employee commitment lies with the failure of many managers and supervisors to honor the fundamental leadership responsibilities required to engage, empower, and inspire employees with whom they work (Clifton & Harter, 2019). That evidence is supported by extensive research from a variety of management scholars who have written about leadership (Burns, 2010; DePree, 2004), empowerment (Zimmerman, 2000; Caldwell & Anderson, 2020), and employee engagement (Kular et al., 2008; Saks & Gruman, 2014).

This paper identifies why many of today's employees choose to limit their dedication to their jobs to the duties set forth in their job descriptions. We address the often-ineffective efforts of leaders, managers, and supervisors to earn employee trust, inspire commitment, and create a culture that motivates high performance. We begin the paper by clarifying the nature of the quiet quitters' attitudes toward work and identify four reasons why this trend has affected such a significant percentage of today's workers. We then identify five leadership responsibilities that many organizations have failed to fully understand that have led to the lack of trust in many of today's leaders by many of today's employees. Finally, we identify five recommendations for leaders, managers, and supervisors who seek to reestablish a culture of trust and commitment and offer concluding comments about the likely consequences for businesses that fail to honor their responsibilities to employees.

2. Understanding the Problem

Although the label, "quiet quitting" was first formalized by Mark Boldger (Buscaglia, 2022) to describe employees' minimal commitment to their work it is nonetheless a new name for a behavior that has been around for a long time. Quiet quitting is manifest as an employee's unwillingness to be an extra-mile performer that typically results from an organization's inability to create a meaningful relationship with its employees (Zenger & Folkman, 2022). Quiet quitting employees limit their effort at work -- often to maintain personal work/life balance or to maintain health and well-being in a high-pressure work environment (Hare, 2022).

As opposed to quitting their jobs, quiet quitters reject the idea that their lives should be dominated by work. A quiet quitter who is asked to perform at a high level but who is not treated as a valued individual by his or her supervisor responds by refusing to perform with maximum dedication (Smith, 2022). Unfortunately, the importance of treating employees with high regard and being committed to employees' professional development has often been ignored by many organizations (Cameron, 2012 & 2021). When workers feel unappreciated, survey results indicate that they have been reciprocating with a low level of personal commitment (Meyer, 2014) and choose quiet quitting in response to their employers' actions (Hopke, 2022).

Although quiet quitting is a predominant viewpoint of both the Millennial Generation (Ellis & Yang, 2022) and the younger Generation Z (Schroth, 2019), it is also a perspective of many older employees who are also dissatisfied with ineffective and untrustworthy managers and supervisors (Damron, 2018). Considering how they have been treated, a growing number of employees resist the idea that they should be expected to work overtime without compensation but should be free to pursue their personal life goals outside of work (Hare, 2022).

The concept of workplace happiness has not historically been a top priority for organizations (Clifton, 2022). In fact, research by Gallup has found that a growing number of employees are chronically unhappy at work. Joo and Lee (2017) have suggested that workplace happiness is directly related to workplace engagement, career satisfaction, and subjective personal wellbeing. Mousa, Massoud and Ayoubi (2020) found that workplace happiness was directly correlated with management behaviors, particularly associated with the degree to which managers demonstrated concern for employees at an individual level. Conversely, many employers have discounted the importance of individual employee feelings but have routinely expected their workers to be thankful for any opportunity given to them and to put in extra effort to succeed (Boogard, 2020). In many organizations, the organizational expectation was that workers had to arrive early and stay late to demonstrate their commitment to their employers and their careers (Sturges & Guest, 2006).

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 47 million employees quit their jobs in 2021 -- the highest quit rate since the bureau began recording that statistic. The phenomenon labeled "The Great Resignation" has reflected employee dissatisfaction with the new employer-employee relationship that imposes on full-time employees a commitment to make their jobs the top priority in their lives (Gittleman, 2022). This employer expectation of complete commitment to the job at the expense of work/life balance has been a major factor for job quitting, particularly for Generation Z (Sharma, 2021) and Millennial (Alesso-Bendisch, 2020). Although 2021 set a record for employees quitting, the Bureau of Labor Statistics has confirmed that 2022 has shown few signs of a slowdown in the Great Resignation trend. There are many underlying reasons for employees choosing to be dissatisfied with their job situations that motivate them to either change jobs or make the quiet quitting choice of simply limiting their degree of job commitment.

3. Reasons for Quiet Quitting

According to Gallup's ***State of the Global Workplace: 2022 Report***, more than half of the U.S. workforce workers feel unappreciated and undervalued at work (Clifton, 2022). Many feel underemployed, stuck in dead-end jobs, and paid less than they are worth (Kelly, 2019). However, in many organizations, other significant causes of quiet quitting have often been overlooked that contribute to employee dissatisfaction. The following are five reasons for quitting that are frequently cited by many employees.

3.1 Lack of Commitment to Career Development

According to the research of the worldwide Gallup study, a "great job" requires that an employer is committed to its employees' personal growth and professional development (Clifton & Harter, 2019). The correlation between an organization's commitment to professional development and employees' job satisfaction has been identified as an important factor for employee retention for decades (Zepeda, 2019). Unfortunately, many employers do not provide employees with a path for professional growth and development – leaving employees feeling that their current position provides little opportunity for progression and that their current job is virtually a dead end (Kelly, 2022). Kruse (2022) explained that employers' failure to communicate to employees their organization's goals and strategy, coupled with this failure to invest in employees' professional development, result in employees feeling uncertain about their future. Lacking the belief that their organizations are committee to their long-term development, many top employees choose to disengage from the organization or leave the firm altogether (Hom, Allen, & Griffith, 2019).

3.2 The Failure to Value Employees

Unfortunately, supervisors and managers in an alarming number of companies lack empathy and compassion toward their employees – often ignoring signs of employee suffering and treating employees as commodities rather than as valued partners (Worline & Dutton, 2017). Employees who work in "command and control" organizations frequently cite their companies' toxic top-down organizational culture as a reason why they are dissatisfied with their leaders (Matos, O'Neill, & Lei, 2018). Employees in such organizations complain of being subjected to systemic harassment, micromanagement, and abusive behavior and quickly become disengaged from their work (Aubrey, 2012).

Caring about employees includes providing what is necessary for an individual's well-being, mental health, welfare, maintenance, and protection (Clifton, 2022). Organizations that demonstrate care and compassion create a consistent experience where employees know their organization cares about them, and the evidence suggests that those employees then reciprocate with higher levels of personal commitment (Hamill, 2019). However, in the post-pandemic working environments, employees at many companies feel compelled by supervisor pressure to push themselves to meet extra-mile work expectations – typically requiring them to take on projects beyond their job descriptions that demand working long hours and causing them to miss important social or family gatherings (Klotz & Bolino, 2022). This lack of sensitivity to work-life balance undermines the employer-employee relationship and conveys the fact that employee needs take second place to organization priorities (Cowart, Gilley, & Avery, 2014).

3.3 Increasing Employee Disconnection

Cecilia Herbert (2022) has concluded that employee belonging is the key human resource management issue for organizations in 2023 and links it to both engagement and employee wellbeing. Other researchers and practitioners also emphasize that employee engagement and a sense of belonging are closely connected concepts (Filstad, Traavik & Gorli, 2019; Caldwell & Anderson, 2023). However, simply being a member of an organization is not enough to feel a sense of belonging (Andejumo, 2021). When workers feel they are not fully informed or included in decision-making related to their jobs, they feel isolated and disconnected from their colleagues and company and do not feel that they full belong (Garland, 2020).

In the post-pandemic world, isolation, loneliness, and disconnection may be particularly sensitive issues for remote workers (Luchetti et al., 2020). A lack of employee connection breeds active and dysfunctional disengagement (Clifton & Harter, 2019), resulting in both the decrease in individual and team morale and a decrease in employee retention (Hopke, 2022). Stress, burnout, and chronic depression impact employee attitudes at work with 28% of employees worldwide feeling disconnected from work, according to the recent research conducted by the Gallup corporation (Clifton, 2022).

3.4 Importance of Employee Autonomy

Workplace autonomy includes defining expected outcomes and values but then empowering employees to do their work as they see fit within those parameters (Yang & Ok Choi, 2009). The importance of autonomous empowerment was well summarized in a ***Harvard Business Review*** article (Lee, Willis, & Tian, 2018). Employees with autonomy at work can make their own decisions about how and when their work will be completed (Wooll, 2021). Unnecessary and unwanted supervisor behaviors can generate substantial negative emotional and physiological responses in employees, can erode interpersonal relationships, and can undermine employee commitment (Cooper, 2020).

The research about extra-role behavior and employee commitment confirm that employee autonomy is directly related to employee performance and job satisfaction (Chiu & Chen, 2005). A micromanaging manager who is overcontrolling employees' activities is not only likely to develop a tarnished reputation and undermines employee morale (Cooper, 2020). Most forward-looking organizations value developing employee autonomy as a critical component of long-term organizational success (Fisher *et al*., 2021). Employee autonomy and the opportunity to be creative have also been linked to increased organizational innovation and improved customer service (Burcharth et al., 2017).

3.5 Decline in Organizational Trust

The Edelman Trust Barometer has confirmed that trust in organizations and their leaders have precipitously declined (Edelman, 2022). The decline in trust of leaders has deteriorated to the point where 58% of participants in a ***Harvard Business Review*** survey reported that they would rather trust a stranger than their boss (Damron, 2018). Employee commitment and trust in leaders are directly related, and extensive research has confirmed that the decline in trust is the key factor eroding organization success (Clifton & Harter, 2019; Kramer & Pittinsky, 2012).

Employees consistently report feeling frustrated when not included in problem-solving directly related to their work and the failure to involve employees in those decisions signals that employees are not deemed worthy of that trust

(Nwosu, Okoh & Goodluck, 2020). The ability of leaders and organizations to demonstrate leadership credibility and competence is essential to creating the organizational trust that has often been called the glue to successful relationships and effective organizations (Kouzes & Posner, 2011 & 2017; Covey, 2004). Brown and colleagues (2015) found a direct relationship between employee trust and financial performance, productivity, and product or service quality.

Each of these five factors contribute to the decision of individual employees to hold back their level of commitment to their organizations – the failure to invest in their organizations manifested repeatedly in organizations as quiet quitting (Constantz, 2022). Because commitment to an organization and trust in its leadership are so critical to innovation, engagement, and competitive advantage, unless the root causes of quiet quitting are effectively addressed, organizations will inevitably underperform and fail to deliver the quality services and products upon which each organization's success is dependent (Clifton & Harter, 2019).

4. Addressing the Quiet Quitting Problem

Despite the high-profile nature of quiet quitting in today's organizations, the apparent reality is that many organizations are either unwilling, unprepared, or unable to effectively address the quiet quitting phenomenon (Hare, 2022). Sturt and Nordstrom (2018) revealed that employers have consistently failed to address employees' needs and present an array of disturbing statistics about the ineffectiveness of many modern leaders. In response to the inadequacies and outright failures of many of today's leaders at motivating employees. quiet quitting is the increasing response of a growing number of today's employees (Smith, 2022).

The feedback from many of the quiet quitters is that they are no longer willing to commit to their organizations when the leaders of those organizations consistently fail to treat employees as valued individuals (cf. Block, 2013). Consistent with the extensive literature about what constitutes effective organizational leadership, we identify five compelling failures that must be addressed if organizations are to attract and retain highly committed employees who are fully committed to achieving greatness.

4.1 Failure to Deliver on Promises

In the wake of The Great Resignation, many organizations pledged to reinvent their employee value proposition and to prioritize employee well-being by implementing changes that address employees' needs (De Smet et al., 2021). However, many organizations have struggled to deliver on those promises in a manner that is relevant to their employees (Herway, 2022). The reality of the 21st century has been that many employers have treated employees as commodities rather than as valued individuals and have failed to honor express or implied commitments (Worline & Dutton, 2017).

Rather than demonstrating their commitment to employees' long-term welfare and valuing employees, Harvard's Larry Katz and Princeton's Alan Krueger (2019) noted that over 90% of the new jobs created in the United States since 2005 were part-time, temporary, contract, or freelance. Employers who believe that their workforce is not worthy of their long-term investment are apparently unwilling to compensate them fairly, provide them with basic benefits required to be safe and secure, or commit to their training and development (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). The long-established leadership research of James Kouzes and Barry Posner (2011 & 2017) confirms that leadership credibility and trust can only be obtained when leaders honor what they commit to do.

4.2 Inability to Prioritize Workplace Culture

Quiet quitting, according to Jake Herway (2022) of the Gallup corporation, begins with the failures of an organization's culture. A toxic organizational culture has five characteristics: disrespect, non-inclusiveness, unethical practices, cutthroat competition, and abuse of power and authority (Garver, 2022). In his new book, ***Blind Spot***, Jon Clifton (2022) reported that toxic, abusive, or cutthroat workplace environments adversely affect workers' physical and mental health. According to a study reported by Wrike, Inc., 94% of employees report feeling stressed at work, and the American Psychological Association has noted that the most common causes of work stress include low salaries (46 percent), lack of opportunities for growth or advancement (41 percent), too heavy a workload (41 percent), long hours (37 percent) and unclear job expectations (35 percent) (Wrike, 2021).

The culture created by organizations tells employees how work is performed, what is valued, and the priorities that organizational leaders deem to be important (Schein & Schein, 2016). Unfortunately, the message that has been consistently sent to many of today's employees seems to be, "Profits are most important; employees are considered to be a means rather than a valued end; and the 'new employment contract' is that employees are largely on their own" (cf. Karnes, 2009). Apparently, the commitment to creating a high-performance and high-trust culture advocated by Jeffrey Pfeffer (1998), Stephen R. Covey (2004), and Max DePree (2004) is no longer considered by many of today's organization leaders.

4.3 Lack of Focus on Employee Well-Being

Employee wellbeing includes the mental, physical, emotional, and economic health of employees (Waida, 2021) and includes many factors that contribute to that overall health or that undermine employee wellbeing (Clinton & van Veldhoven, 2012; Greenwood & Anas, 2021). Unfortunately, employers have neglected employee wellbeing to the point where it has reached near-crisis proportions, with 28% percent of employees reporting sadness, chronic depression, anxiety, and burn-out as factors that make their lives miserable (Clifton, 2022). According to the **Wall Street Journal**, quiet quitting employees have increasingly refused to sacrifice their health, wellness, relationships, and dignity to benefit their employers -- especially when those employers have been unappreciative of employees' contributions to organization success (Smith, 2022).

In the quest for short-term profits, an overwhelming number of managers and supervisors have taken on the role of "boss" rather than "coach" (Clifton & Harter, 2019) and have failed to acknowledge the need to demonstrate genuine empathy, respect, and care in creating relationships with troubled employees (Worline & Dutton, 2017). Ironically, a growing body of evidence has confirmed that organizations that are committed to their employees' well-being have found that their employees are more productive, more committed to their organization, and more innovative (Rath & Harter, 2019).

4.4 Failing to Address Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity, equity, and inclusion and treating all employees with respect and dignity have become major area of concern for a growing group of employees – especially for younger employees and minorities (Schroth, 2019). Employees of the future have a far more positive view of the importance of fair and equitable treatment of others than their predecessors (Pichler, Kohli, & Granitz, 2021). The foundation of diversity and inclusion is a culture that emphasizes learning, care, collaboration, and mutual trust (Robinson, 2021). In organizations with a learning-oriented culture, people who bring distinct perspectives and experiences to the table are more likely to be seen as valuable contributors and positioned to progress in increasing diversity in the workplace (Cheng & Groysberg, 2021).

Employee resource groups (ERGs) that represent diverse interests and goals have proven to be effective in promoting fair and equitable treatment (Green, 2018). Emphasizing diversity and inclusion provide opportunities for employees to engage in activities that promote fair treatment; a healthier respect for people with different backgrounds; and greater feelings of engagement, belongingness, and commitment (Bhuyan & Caldwell, 2022). Employee engagement groups allow employees to connect with peers who share their values and goals, creating a sense of shared perspectives, greater understanding, and increased organization alignment (Stein et al., 2021).

4.5 Failing to Create Meaningful Work Opportunities

According to a 2018 article in the **Harvard Business Review**, nine out of ten employees surveyed would accept a lower salary for more meaningful work (Anchor, Reece, Kellerman, & Robichaux, 2018). Furthermore, research from a variety of reputable sources confirms that in the past two years, a lack of meaningful work has been one of the leading causes of employee turnover (Bailey et al., 2019). A fulfilling work environment has several benefits. According to a meta-analysis of research, meaningful work is associated with higher engagement, more substantial commitment, and increased job satisfaction (Lysova et al., 2019). It is well established that employees who find their work fulfilling tend to perform better than those who do not (Rumlali, 2008).

Differences in the definition of meaningful work vary according to employees' ages (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), although the definition of meaningful work for employees of every generational group includes the desire to discover and become the best version of oneself (Weeks & Schaffert, 2019). Meaningful work, developing one's potential, and striving to excel has been defined as key responsibilities of great leaders (Covey, 2004) and a moral obligation that leaders owe to those with whom they labor (DePree, 2004).

These five shortcomings are unfortunately far too common in many of today's organizations and the failure to address these issues has exacerbated the quiet quitting revolution that has become so prevalent.

5. Conclusion

Unfortunately, the prognosis for organizations in addressing the quiet quitting phenomenon continues to be discouraging. The passive-aggressive response of "Quiet Firing" is likely to be a self-defeating response because 41% of employees surveyed are actively looking for new jobs and expect to leave their organizations within a year (Consorte, 2022). According to Gallup's State of the Global Workplace report, job dissatisfaction is at an all-time high. Globally, disengaged workers cost the economy $7.8 trillion in lost productivity (Pendell, 2022; Espada, 2022).

If employers want to address the root cause reasons why quiet quitters are dissatisfied, they need to reexamine their commitment to understanding all workers but especially Gen Z and Millennial employees, and their motivation to work. Employers must ensure that employees are held accountable for individual performance, team collaboration, and customer value, in addition to helping them understand how their work contributes to the organization's larger purpose (Harter, 2022).

Because managers and supervisors are most responsible for unsatisfactory relationships at work, employers need to immediately invest in training their managers and supervisors to be coaches, not bosses. Creating a culture of care and leading with empathy requires exceptional communication, a solid commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and an understanding of the needs of individual employees (Poorkavoos, 2016). In addition, actively listening to employees is an effective way to gain a thorough understanding of their individual needs.

Finally, Top Management Teams need to reevaluate their assumptions about the values of the next generation of employees and develop programs, policies, and practices that reflect a more accurate understanding of those cohort groups. The most effective leaders do not adhere to stereotypes based on generation or any other factor. Instead, they individually assess each employee's needs and priorities and consider the impact of quiet quitting across the organization (Bremen, 2022).

To motivate employees to give more effort and to be committed to organization goals, those who lead organizations should do more than simply create a quid pro quo exchange relationship if they wish to earn employee dedication and buy-in (Burns, 2010). Peter Block (2013) was a strong advocate of treating employees as "owners and partners" rather than as underlings and subordinates. Workplaces are complex and creating a culture that values employees and treats them as assets rather than cost centers has proven to be a key to increased employee commitment and greater productivity (Cameron, 2021).

A culture of gratitude, appreciation, and compassion motivates and engages employees, strengthens and develops quality relationships, and nudges prosocial behavior that ultimately goes beyond the company's walls (Worline & Dutton, 2017). Whenever people are engaged in meaningful work and are treated with high trust, dignity, and respect, there is an exponentially greater likelihood that those employees will look forward to coming to work every day and will be more likely to go the extra mile in pursuit of organization objectives (Beer, 2009). Nonetheless, until organizations are willing to change their thinking about what they expect from employees and what they are willing to do to promote employee wellbeing, the unfortunate prognosis is that quiet quitting will continue and the potential of many of today's businesses will go unrealized.

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