

How To Use DEI-Focused Manager Training to Re-Engage Employees

HR Dive | Elena Richards | November 30, 2022



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"Before we pontificate about quiet quitting ... ask if you're doing everything you can to be an employer of choice," writes DEI leader Elena Richards of KPMG.

From The Wall Street Journal to job advice sites, "quiet quitting" had gone viral – but months later, everyone continues to talk past one another, with little clear guidance for organizational leaders approaching the issue.

Quiet quitting is not just about one's individual experiences within the workplace, but the larger, shared experience of declining employee engagement across organizations. So, where does it stem from, how can organizations respond, and what can people do avoid the feeling?

As we completely reimagine how we work and collaborate coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, people's needs and expectations from employers have been reshaped. And most critically, with this trend going viral as our most diverse working generation (Generation Z) enters the workplace, quiet quitting requires an intersectional, equity-focused lens to find solutions.

So, where should organizations begin? To me, manager support and education is the first actionable policy option in the fight against quiet quitting. Organizations must emphasize a two-

pronged approach that helps managers improve their ability to support their teams and recognizes managers themselves are facing unique challenges in the workplace.

Don't expect support and engagement to look the same for everyone on your team

Gallup research found that from 2019 to 2022, the percentage of younger workers who strongly agreed that someone cares about them, someone encourages their development and that they have opportunities to learn and grow dropped 10 or more percentage points.

Data supports that a lack of connection and mentorship, as well as ongoing experiences of bias in the workplace, create experiences that cause individuals to disengage.

Hybrid work environments can exacerbate inequities, which is why DEI-focused manager support is critical. One study led by Stanford University researchers suggests that remote workers are less likely to be promoted than their in-office peers; despite being 13% more productive, they were promoted half as often. With White men being the demographic most eager to return to office, survey analysis from FiveThirtyEight and Future Forum underscored that "physical offices run the risk of becoming whiter, more male-dominated, and more unfriendly to working mothers than they were before the pandemic" given return-to-office preferences.

Establishing connections early on and building long-term, equitable relationships to mentors and organizations can foster a culture that keeps people invested. For early-career individuals, in-person training opportunities and in-office time can be critical. If an individual has never met their team outside of assignments, disconnection is no surprise. Virtual or in-person, managers should be vocal in recognizing and commending the work of their employees. In the long term, affinity spaces like business resource groups, formal and informal mentorship, and cross-level interactions build lasting engagement.

In the hybrid environment, what is perceived as "all in" will look different. One team member may be visibly putting in hours in the office, but others are doing so virtually. Managers should adapt what "all in" means for their teams – is it about being in the office, the quantity of work, the quality, or some combination thereof? And managers should be wary of implicit biases affecting these perceptions of "all in": As human resources manager and career coach Mercedes Swan pointed out to The Wall Street Journal, employees from underrepresented groups may not even have the leverage to "quit quietly." She points specifically to the experience of Black women, perceived as doing less work despite performing at the same level of their counterparts, who could experience backlash if they decided to step back or set firmer boundaries at work.

Because of implicit biases and the reality of who's returning to the office, ongoing DEI education for managers should support them in equitable decision making around promotion and compensation and inclusive culture-building.

Managers need to put on their own oxygen masks, too

A lot has been asked of managers in the transitions to remote and hybrid work. The pandemic was difficult all around, with unhappiness reaching record highs in 2021. But the impacts of the pandemic were not evenly distributed; many women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals

faced socioeconomic realities that differed significantly from their White, cisgender male colleagues. Add in burnout, and disengagement at the manager level isn't so surprising.

To support work-life boundaries, leaders actively encouraged their people to log off from work. After all, one Staples survey found that Americans were working an average of 6.1% more hours in 2020 compared to 2019, and a NordVPN analysis found that homebound employees in the U.S were logging three more hours per day on the job than before lockdowns. This type of "all in" approach simply isn't sustainable.

In the hybrid world, energy-saving tools as well as more opportunities for connection should become the norm. At KPMG, we integrated time and energy management policies that gave employees breaks from cameras and moments to breathe between meetings—as well as designated time periods for uninterrupted work.

Importantly, managers should make mental health a priority that goes beyond a talking point. It's near-impossible to support your team when you're not feeling supported, too. Taking a hard look at your organization's retention and attrition, as well as leadership pipelines, will further inform where managers need more support.

Connecting to workplace culture

We have a responsibility to foster environments where all our people feel like they belong and are supported in their journeys. As we assess this landscape of declining employee engagement, the most tangible tactic employers can take is to focus on how managers are supported and support their teams.

So before we pontificate about quiet quitting and what it means for the future of American talent, ask if you're doing everything you can to be an employer of choice. Recognize your people and the landscape they've been working in over the past few years. Embedding a DEI lens into your policies is just the first place to start.