Quiet Quitting

Quiet Quitting is the latest workforce trend that has taken the media by storm. The new term refers to employees doing the bare minimum, often avoiding additional projects outside of their job descriptions. Quiet quitters rarely go above and beyond and lack interest in investing any emotional connection to their jobs. Simply put, they finish their tasks and log off for the day.

Why Are Employees Quiet Quitting?

- Disengaged and disconnected: Employees underwent major shifts during the pandemic. Layoffs, remote work, and now back-to-office mandates or hybrid scheduling – these sudden changes could be causing a disconnect.

- **Lack of growth and development opportunities**: Employees can feel they've reached a dead end in their current roles when growth opportunities seem limited. This feeling can build without a clear career path within the organization and the resources needed to develop their skills.

- **Underpaid or overworked**: Over the last year, turnover rates were at an all-time high - forcing employees who stayed at their jobs to take on more job responsibilities without additional compensation. Companies that overwork their employees risk a greater chance of burnout and building a toxic culture.

- **Setting work boundaries**: The pandemic left employees exhausted and burnt out. They are no longer interested in sacrificing their work-life balance or well-being for a job – putting an end to the once popular hustle culture.

Identifying Potential Quiet Quitters

It is important to recognize signs that could potentially indicate a quiet quitter on the team, otherwise, you may risk negatively impacting employee satisfaction, team dynamics, and the work environment for other employees.

Here are some of the most common signs to look out for:

- The employee seems disengaged from their work or the team

- You notice a lack of participation in group meetings or brainstorming sessions

- Their productivity or quality of work is declining

- The employee seems disinterested in participating in team-building events

Employee Assistance Referral Guidance

Observing Performance and Identifying a Problem

Employee assistance begins by first identifying a problem that interferes with job performance or individual happiness, either directly or indirectly.

What are some indicators that a problem exists? Problems with personal appearance or personal hygiene; a dramatic or unusual increase in the number of personal phone calls made or received; fights with co-workers; unusual change, typically for the worse, in job performance; avoidance of others (peers, superiors, or even friends); and tardiness and absenteeism resulting from illness. These are just a few warning signs of possible trouble.

How does a manager confirm that these signs indicate the existence of a personal problem?

Direct observation of the problem. A sure sign is when the individual is observed drinking excessively or gambling, whether on or off the job.

Observation of specific behaviors associated with a problem. Does the individual stagger around, reeking of liquor? Is someone seen taking pills?

Observation of excessive or unusual emotion. Is an employee caught crying or laughing inappropriately? Sending outrageous e-mails? Having problems with anger?

Observation of symptoms. Is there a sudden, dramatic change in individual performance? Is the individual fighting with others? Acting aggressively, perhaps in an uncharacteristic way?

Rumors. Though rumors are not always accurate, they are sometimes worth checking out, especially when they can be supported with other evidence indicative of a personal problem.

These categories represent a hierarchy of evidence for detecting the need for employee assistance.

Who should identify a problem? The answer is simple: Anyone who notices. Personal problems can be identified by those inside the work setting (peers or teammates, superiors, or subordinates, etc.) or those outside it (family members, friends, or acquaintances).

However, a key point is this: No individual is ready for employee assistance until they recognize that there is a problem and expresses willingness to do something about it. Acceptance that help is needed is an essential first step in any solution and any self-improvement effort. For example, the alcoholic who refuses to acknowledge that they have a problem cannot be successfully helped until they admit it. Nor can the gambler, the thief, or the potential suicide. For that matter, no employee performance problem can be effectively addressed as long as the person exhibiting it or experiencing it refuses to confront the problem.

For this reason, it is important to discuss the problem with the employee. This responsibility is not one that managers relish. Some argue that it is not the manager's responsibility to deal with personal issues in the workplace. Others counter that any behavior that impedes employee performance is rightly a matter for a manager's concern and action.

Gathering Information, Determining Cause, and Assessing Significance

What is the employee's problem? What caused it? How important is it? Addressing these questions are the next steps in the employee assistance process.

Frequently, a manager notices the symptoms before encountering the problem itself. The question is: Is the problem behavior isolated, or is it only a symptom of something else? If the answer is not immediately apparent, most managers know that the truth will eventually become apparent. There are always a few people who create problems; what you want to be on the alert for is a pattern of problem behavior.

Detecting a pattern of behavior takes time. Unfortunately, in many cases, the key to successful treatment depends on early recognition of a problem and prompt referral to skilled professionals. Early recognition of a problem with drugs or alcohol is not always easy, however, especially for a manager who rarely comes in direct personal contact with subordinates.

Managers can deal with this problem by closely monitoring their work groups. Ask questions. Express concern. Take an interest in what people say about their home life. Don't be obvious, but do think of it as one way of taking the pulse of the work group and the individuals.

Another way to detect problems early is to encourage subordinates to talk openly about their problems or those of co-workers about whom they are concerned. Stress that anything, including family matters, is fair game for discussion.

As the manager expresses willingness to listen, detecting problem behavior becomes easier. Training in recognizing problems and counseling are additional skills that will help managers gather information and determine what kind of help (informal or professional) is needed and when.

Planning and Carrying Out a Discussion

There are three ways to conduct a counseling interview: (1) the tell-and-sell approach, (2) the tell-and-listen approach, and (3) the problem-solving approach. The first is highly directive, the second is nondirective, and the third is interactive.

In the tell and sell approach, the manager describes the performance problem, sketches what they know about it, and suggests a specific course of action. The purpose of this interview, a "positive confrontation," is to persuade the employee that a problem exists and then to clarify what the manager thinks should be done about it. This approach is useful for shaking individuals out of complacency, but it should be exercised with care: It can provoke

defensiveness and serve just the opposite purpose for which it was intended.

In the tell and listen approach, the manager describes a problem from their perspective and then listens carefully to employee explanations and comments about it. The purpose is to solicit information and gather facts. This approach is appropriate when good rapport already exists between manager and subordinate.

In the problem-solving approach, the focus is on direct mutual communication. The manager interacts with the employee on two levels at once: content and feeling. On the content level, the manager focuses on the performance problem; on the feeling level, they tune in to the subtleties of the employee's emotions, whether expressed vocally or through body language. The interview opens a dialogue on an issue or problem, conveys concern, and explores solutions.

Planning a counseling interview is critical. The manager should begin with a clear purpose, have facts about the employee's job requirements and actual performance close at hand, and be prepared with questions. Undoubtedly, training in counseling skills can improve the abilities of managers to conduct these interviews and help them recognize problems and tones when a referral to a trained psychologist or other healthcare professional might be appropriate.

Pointers for Planning and Conducting a Counseling Interview with a Problem Employee:

- Hold the meeting in private.
- Minimize potential for interruptions (e.g., phone calls, drop-in visitors).
- Begin with small talk to set the employee at ease.
- Make clear early on in the discussion that the focus is on the employee, but the interview is not for disciplining.
- Describe what is known about the employee's long-term performance over the past few years.
- Give praise if it is due.
- Describe performance requirements for the employee's job (What should be?).

- Describe the employee's recent performance (What is?).
- Pinpoint gaps between requirements and realities.
- Stress the importance of the gap and its consequences.
- Explain what the cause appears to be.
- Suggest action; listen to employee response; help deal with the problem.

Planning and Carrying Out Action

Once it is apparent that an employee has a personal problem that affects work performance, the question is this: What should be done about it? If the manager is satisfied that the problem stems from the person rather than from inadequate feedback, interdependency of work tasks, poor control over work outcomes, or other matters that the individual can rarely influence, the next question is this: Is the problem primarily limited to the work environment, or is it only part of a larger problem affecting the individual?

For problems limited to individual work performance alone, one approach to planning and carrying out corrective action is a performance improvement plan. A performance improvement plan is an agreement between the employee and the manager, formalized in writing. To solve a specific problem, such as tardiness, a limited contract might be all that is necessary. Employee and manager negotiate what the problem is, what standard of performance is expected (for example, no tardiness is acceptable, but even with good excuses it cannot exceed two instances per month), how performance will be measured, how often performance reviews will take place, and what the consequences of poor performance will be. This approach can lead to definite improvement in behavior. If it does not, then the employee can either be disciplined or referred to professional help, depending on the nature of the problem.

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