

Are Your Managers 'Quietly Firing' Your Best People by Mistake?

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You've likely heard of quiet quitting by now, but how about quiet firing? It may be an unfamiliar term, but it's worthy of attention because it could be damaging employee morale and engagement. Worst of all, you may not even realize it's happening.

Recently, we have seen an increase in chatter around so-called quiet quitting. This is when workers resist going above and beyond in their current jobs as they fight to rebalance their lives and rewrite workplace rules. At the same time, and even less visibly, quiet firing could be unintentionally happening to your top performers.

In an interview with [Forbes](#), [Leslie Tarnacki](#), senior vice president of human resources at WorkForce Software defined quiet firing as when a manager takes actions that make a person's job unpleasant or unrewarding in order to get that employee to leave on his or her own terms. So in that sense, quiet firing is not formally dismissing an employee; rather, the term refers to actions by a manager intended to make the quiet quitter's job so unpleasant that he quits on his own volition. Think of it as a passive-aggressive strategy for compelling the employee to leave, perhaps not unlike someone who wants to end a dating relationship but can't bring themselves to cut the cord herself.

A recent [LinkedIn News](#) poll reported that 48% of employees had seen quiet firing at their workplace. But let's be clear, not all quiet firing is intentional. Companies are realizing that it's easy for employees to get their wires crossed. Inadvertent behaviors of untrained or inexperienced managers might give the impression to high performers that they are not interested in their work or helping them to advance their career when that's not the managers' intent.



Some common misperceptions managers may have about high performers include:

- "They don't need feedback. There is nothing I need them to do differently."
- "High performers can adapt to changing priorities at the drop of a hat."
- "They are smart! They can figure out difficult assignments without coaching."

Additionally, if these high performers are getting their work done, managers may question the need to visit them on the floor at all, let alone check in for regular one-on-one discussions.

It is easy to see how managers could be sending the wrong message to the very employees that organizations want to retain the most. Leaders may inadvertently give off signals of quiet firing by:

- Failing to provide timely and constructive feedback
- Assigning tasks that are perceived as impossible
- Switching priorities without warning or input from their team
- Being generally absent for important conversations
- Consistently giving work that is below an employee's ability
- Not investing time in employees' professional growth

How do you avoid these costly mistakes? Here are four actions managers can proactively take to help retain the best performers.

1

Feedback Is a Gift. Give Liberally and Often.

Checking in with employees only once a year during a prescribed annual review is woefully insufficient in today's workplace. Employees are demanding a shift to a culture where leaders provide regular feedback along with recognition and ongoing talent development. In his book "Giving Feedback," author Jamie Harris warns that you shouldn't be tempted to leave your high performers alone. Harris told the Harvard Business Review, "The higher the performer, the more frequently you should be providing feedback. Don't wait for review time. You and your company depend on retaining top performers. Therefore, it is a wise investment of your time and energy to support and develop them." Many managers think feedback is about addressing problem performance, but that could not be further from the truth. It is really about engagement. [According to Officevibe](#), "4 out of 10 workers are actively disengaged when they get little or no feedback, and 28% of employees report that feedback is not frequent enough to help them understand how to improve."



Leaders must know how to give feedback in creative, personalized ways and be skilled enough to point out strengths and opportunities to improve in a balanced way that enables true growth. [Employee surveys from Officevibe show](#) that "82% of employees appreciate positive and negative feedback; and 43% of highly engaged employees receive feedback at least once a week as opposed to 18% of low engagement employees."

2

Provide Clear Direction for Enhanced Engagement.

Research has shown that it takes a 20% pay raise to lure most employees away from a manager who engages them, and next to nothing to poach most disengaged workers. In a tight labor market where costs are soaring, retaining and engaging your workforce is more important than ever before.



Top performers may repeatedly "figure it out" when it comes to daunting assignments that would derail less capable employees, making it easy for managers to take shortcuts and give the tough projects to the stars who don't need much handholding. But this is a missed opportunity.

Consistently setting clear expectations and following up regularly can have a significant impact on workforce engagement and retention. Managers should establish routines that will help them "walk the talk" to inspire their teams, develop a strong culture and explore how to make connections by creating visible goals and linking them to corporate priorities. They also need to make themselves available to coach and support their people.

3

Live the Purpose: Make Work Meaningful.

For most employees in this post-pandemic world, finding meaning in their work is paramount. Especially younger workers who are now joining the workforce.

According to George Serafeim, Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, "Many of my students tell me that they cannot imagine having a job that's just a job. They want more than that – they want fulfillment and purpose – and insist that any business not prioritizing social contribution is going to be left behind, unable to keep star employees or recruit anyone of quality."¹

People want to understand and believe in the purpose of their company, their responsibility in their job and in their team and know their place in the corporation. Lewis Garrad and Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic wrote in Harvard Business review that "research consistently shows that employees experiencing meaningful work are more likely to report better health, well-being, teamwork and engagement; they bounce back faster from setbacks and are more likely to view mistakes as learning opportunities rather than failures."

Leaders play a huge role in helping employees understand the purpose and mission of the company, why their roles matter, how they contribute and where exactly their unique talents fuel success. Helping employees find satisfaction in the process, grow from collaboration and learn from their achievements keeps high performers engaged and productive.



4

Be Visible. Be Available.

One of the most cited signs of quiet firing is being ignored by leadership. Some managers still assume that if a worker is doing their work—and doing it well, then they don't need attention. They could not be more wrong!

MAP Consulting points out that it is "common for leaders and managers to spend 80% of their time working closely with employees who have all sorts of challenges and needs while spending only 20% of their time building up and bolstering their top performers." Consultant Sheley Smith suggests in Forbes that "this is the least effective use of a manager's time. Nurturing the best employees provides the highest return on investment of time and resources."

Researchers at Indiana University have estimated that high performers can deliver up to 400% more productivity than an average employee, so there's good reason to support and develop them.



¹ Serafeim, George. Purpose + Profit: How Business Can Lift Up The World. HarperCollinsLeadership, 2022.



what they need to succeed. When leaders promote top performers into managerial roles because of their hard skills, they should also have a plan to develop their soft skills like emotional intelligence, integrity, empathy and communication ability.

David Hassell, CEO and co-founder of 15Five told HR Morning: "Managers especially need the training and tools to create an engaging and empowering environment for their teams, one in which they know that they are contributing with others toward a shared purpose." "The manager-employee relationship is central to the employee experience, their likelihood for success in their roles, and ultimately the success of the entire organization."

Managers should adopt a "love them or they'll leave you" attitude to ensure they are doing what it takes to keep these high-performing workers pumped up, empowered and productive. As the post-pandemic labor market tightens, the stakes are higher than ever for managers to create, maintain and nurture an engaged workplace to retain their high-value, high-performing workers.

Can You Afford to Postpone Investment in Your Managers?

How much does it cost to replace an employee? Many factors influence this, but here is a widely accepted estimate.

Entry-level employees	30% to 50% of annual salary
Middle-level employees	About 150% of annual salary
Specialized/High-level employees	Up to 400% of annual salary

Studies have shown that [managers account for 70% of the variance](#) in employee engagement. That is a big performance gap for most organizations.

Businesses need to be proactive in ensuring that their managers are up for the task of managing and that they're equipped with

Training also helps managers recognize their ability to influence performance by being more visible and engaging team members on a personal and professional level by "walking the talk," giving clear directions, cascading responsibilities and actively working to help the operating system run effectively.

Skills like these are critical to ensuring inadvertent *Quiet firing* isn't pushing high performers out of the organization by mistake.

At a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to onboard, develop and retain a skilled workforce, effectively managing employees has never been so important. Investment in developing managers' skills now may prevent big personnel and dollar losses later. Ensuring managers are equipped not just to direct but also to engage and inspire will help safeguard the business against both quiet quitting and quiet firing, while also providing a meaningful work experience that allows high performers to thrive.

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