

# With So Many People Quitting, Don't Overlook Those Who Stay

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For anyone who doubted, the data is in. The Great Resignation is real and it's happening. The U.S. Department of Labor reports that during the months of April, May, and June 2021 a total of 11.5 million workers quit their jobs. And it's not over. According to Gallup research, 48 percent of employees are actively looking to make a change, and according to Personio research, nearly 1:4 will do so in the next six months. Those looking for new opportunities will find ripe opportunities; in June the U.S. hit an all-time high of 10.1 million job openings.

What does this all mean to your organization? You are likely juggling two pressing needs: hiring to backfill people who have left and hiring new people to support business growth. The scarcity is real — too few people for too many jobs. The imbalance of this supply-demand highlights more than ever that productivity is about people.

The best way to stabilize your business is to stem the tsunami of attrition and increase your retention. In the frantic need to hire more people, the group we often forget to attend to are the folks who stay — those showing up day-in and day-out shouldering the work that needs to get done. Think about what these people — the ones who are here, working for and with you — need now. The short answer is they need to be seen for who they are and what they are contributing. It's your job as the leader to make sure they're getting the recognition they deserve.

And we get it: As employers, leaders, managers, and HR professionals, you've been dealing with a lot of uncertainty and change. You have a lot on your plate. Not having the right people in the right quantities in the right seats to get the work done creates a hamster-wheel effect — you keep running, faster and faster, exhausted with forces outside your control. So let's control what you can control, and that is you. If you want to stem the rate of turnover in your organization or team, you must look inside yourself and decide what is possible. So, let's stick our finger in that proverbial hamster wheel and make it stop for a minute. Let's pause and see what is possible, what you can do to make a difference.

Here are four steps leaders can take now to best navigate the Great Resignation:

## 1. Be aware of your impact.

As leaders, people are watching you all the time whether you realize it or not. So, pause and consider how you are showing up in both your words and your actions. Let's say your company is experiencing record YTD turnover of 25% and hiring is falling 60% below target (real scenarios in far too many companies). Your people are worried and stressed. How do you message the realities of these pain points to your people? Are you aware of how your own concerns and frustrations are experienced by others? Are you unintentionally adding to their fear and uncertainty? When you become aware of your impact, you can control it and steer it in the right direction.

## 2. Focus on potential and possibility.

On the flip side, let's say your organization has 75% retention and you have attracted and welcomed a large number of new people to the organization. Consider what outcome you want to create out of this uniquely disruptive time. This is a time to be grounded in pragmatism blended with possibility, gratitude, and recognition of what your people, old and new, are going through. Get curious and ask:

- What do you envision as the best possible outcome for this situation?
- What excites you about that?
- What does that give you/the team/the organization?

When you communicate to your people in this way, the impact is one of potential and possibility instead of fear and uncertainty.

## 3. Make it okay to leave.

Speaking about communication, let's look at one other area where you may be creating an unintended impact — how you and others in the organization treat people when they leave. In far too many companies, when an employee gives notice the reaction is akin to an emotional breakup — you've been left and you feel rejected. This triggers some not great behavior like a tendency to make the person leaving “wrong” and doubt their trustworthiness or integrity — even though that was not the case before they gave notice. There is a penchant to dismiss their presence and devalue their contribution. Think deeply about what this type of behavior signals to the departing employee and remember, those that remain and are watching.

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Who Is Driving the Great Resignation?

An alternative is to approach these transitions with gratitude. It's helpful to realize the era of lifelong employment is over and with rare exception, your employees are with your organization as a pit stop on their career journey. They've contributed and hopefully, they've learned some new things. They are not the same person they were when they joined and the same goes for you and for the organization. What would it be like to pause when a resignation occurs and give voice to these things from both sides of the relationship? What would be created if you paused to acknowledge how both sides of the relationship have grown and evolved? Rather than viewing a resignation as a rejection of the relationship, what could be possible if you began to view it as an inflection point in its evolution?

The talent pool is tight, and careers are long. End this phase of your time together with appreciation.

## 4. Give your employees the respect and attention they deserve

The marketplace for talent has shifted. You need to think of your employees like customers and put thoughtful attention into retaining them. This is the first step to slow attrition and regain your growth curve. And this does not happen when they feel ignored in the fever to hire new people or underappreciated for the effort, they make to keep business moving forward. You cannot take your people for granted and expect them to stay — healthy relationships do not work that way. Here are three steps:

### Re-recruit them.

Consider what conversations would be like if you were recruiting them to your company.

- Spend time to understand their motivations and ambitions. With so much new hiring happening, identify where opportunities might exist inside the organization (even if it is outside of your team) to help them fulfill unrealized dreams and ambitions.
- Help them see and claim the positive impact they are making in the organization. Acknowledge not just what they are doing, but why it matters. Let them know what you appreciate about how they are showing up during difficult times. People want to know they are making a difference.
- Don't stop. These are not one-time conversations. You can't just wade in, have a talk, and think all is good. This should be the primary focus of each manager and leader in your company.

### Reward them.

This may ignite the need for a systemic look at how and what is recognized and rewarded in your organization. Now may be the time to challenge the status quo if what you are seeing from your people and hearing from the talent marketplace is misaligned to your company's current reality. This is not just about paying people more — research tells us the motivational effect of pay raises is short-lived. Just as important is how you recognize and value the contributions and impact of your people.

- Think about the DNA of your organization. If the old ways of doing things no longer serve the organization and its people, figure out what does.
- Be willing to let go of the past ... it's gone.
- Play the long game here. Be sure your company's compensation philosophy is clear and understood by all. (That starts with you.) Make sure accountability is in place so that those current employees are not shorted when new people are hired.

Equity starts in how you value contribution. You may not be the only one in your organization to fix the myriad of issues linked to recognition and rewarding your people, but you can lead. You can give voice to the issues and advocate for accountability.

## Engage them.

Businesses are hurting and at the root of that pain for many today is a shortage of people to do the work. Your existing people feel that pain as they extend themselves to pick-up extra shifts to provide coverage, listen to customer complaints when they are helpless to fix the real issue, or witness one more colleague call it “quits” when their tipping point is reached. So, be bold and engage your people in helping you solve problems.

- Ask for their help. This requires courage because admitting that you do not know all the answers is vulnerable work. It takes strength and confidence to appreciate that outcomes are better when more ideas are included, when fuller representation is present and diverse perspectives are heard.
- Give them agency to help mitigate the day-to-day concerns they are faced with. Create space for them to step up, participate and inform the way forward. This sends the crucial message that they are trusted and valued.
- Focus on the desired outcome. Actively seek the insights of diverse voices and points of view into what will help achieve it, especially insights and ideas different than your own. Remain open to being surprised and delighted.

Daring to be vulnerable and to not to know it all paves the path to creating deeper engagement and loyalty from all your stakeholders: teammates, peers, colleagues, and direct reports. You lead the way by opening the door.