

Quiet Quitting and Why Leadership Should Pay Attention

By John Herrera



“People leave managers, not companies.”—Marcus Buckingham

We have probably all heard this quote, and it may certainly resonate with us. Or we may know someone who has left a job for this reason. But a phenomenon gaining attention these days—one that is very detrimental to our organizations—is an age-old behavior given the formal name of quiet quitting.

Upon doing a quick Internet search, we find that quiet quitting isn’t necessarily associated with one actually quitting their employment, rather with doing just enough of what the job requires within the defined work hours. So why is this more detrimental to an organization than people actually leaving their employment? Both behaviors are a result of people unhappy with leadership. But having staff who are behaving in a quiet-quitting manner means that you are not getting their full potential—which negatively affects other staff and their performance. The resulting outcome diminishes your brand, organizational reputation, and customer service.

ORGANIZATIONAL TRUST

I can recall some of my early APPA Leadership Academy trainings in Hilton Head, South Carolina, where we focused extensively on what makes a good leader and why leaders fail. Our training included workshops on self-discovery and growth as facilities professionals, and it was always explained that our staff is the most important asset in our organizations. The training experience was amazing, and it allowed me to talk with many people of various backgrounds and experience levels. The resounding common takeaway was that as leaders, we should work toward developing organizational trust with our employees and encourage our direct reports

to further trust one another and foster the “team approach,” because we grow stronger by working together as an organization than by relying on single superstars to carry the load. Feeling recharged and excited to get back to my organization, I, like many other attendees, must have told anyone who would listen that they should attend an APPA training and that it was their mission to inspire a healthy and trusting organization.

The reality for most of us is that as years go by, work gets complicated, staff start to burn out, and we find ourselves wondering what happened. What happened with many facilities leaders is that we started paying less attention to staff relationships, which affected their work life well-being, failing to celebrate their accomplishments and being unable to provide the same attention and support as we had before. This certainly wasn’t intentional. We got used to doing more with less for too long and were under pressure to produce results. The result today is that we are beginning to notice a higher propensity of staff quiet quitting, and so we need to refocus our attention back to our employees—because I believe we can reverse this behavior.

It’s interesting to read articles and listen to stories from my colleagues, family, and friends about their experience with quiet quitting. What I hear isn’t any different from when I started my APPA journey in Atlanta, Georgia, enrolling in the Institute for Facilities Management. Employees don’t quietly quit their employers just because they are dissatisfied with the work; rather, they do so because their leadership struggles to build a trusting relationship with them and fails to foster a positive work environment. As a result, individuals experience various levels of feeling excluded and unsupported, and have little trust in their supervisors. In this case, it’s easy to understand why staff choose not to go the extra mile. However, we should also be aware that we can’t win over all of our staff. There are people who may just be unhappy regardless of your efforts and those of your supervisory staff.

THE DESIRE TO TRUST

A key takeaway I found in my research, training, and working experience is that most employees want to trust their organization and their lead-

ers. Employees want to know that the extra effort they contribute is valued and appreciated, and they want to feel valued as part of the team. Therefore, it is important that leaders establish and maintain a trusting relationship with staff. This means being open and honest with employees; communicating often and explaining the “why”; being empathetic, supportive, and accessible; and connecting with them so they know you care about them, their professional growth, and the importance of a positive work-life balance. We must remind ourselves that our employees are the most important assets in our organizations.

So, what’s next? We should be asking ourselves if the problem rests with other leaders in our organizations or with our direct reports; or are we the problem—or a combination of it all? Are you making an honest self-reflection about how you are affecting staff moral and organizational trust? The most important step—regardless of whether or not you think there is a problem—is to talk with your employees, ask about their experience with the organization, and see what suggestions they might have to make it more efficient and effective. Remember that quiet quitting isn’t a new behavior, and we don’t have to reinvent the wheel. We need to revisit our APPA training and personal work experiences and refocus attention toward our number one organizational asset—our employees. ☹

John Herrera is director at Arizona State University in Phoenix, AZ. He can be reached at john.a.herrera@asu.edu.