

Vitality

An EFAP Article for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



Quiet Quitting or Quiet Cracking?

How to Improve Employee Engagement and Motivation

In recent years, the workplace has witnessed a shift in how employees engage—or disengage—with their work. Terms like quiet quitting and quiet cracking have entered the HR and leadership conversation, describing subtle yet significant changes in employee motivation and well-being. These patterns emerge when employees stop going the extra mile or remain physically present but feel emotionally and mentally depleted.

While these terms capture different experiences, they share a common thread: a decrease of motivation and connection. For leadership and HR professionals, recognizing and addressing these signs is important to maintaining engagement, productivity, and organizational health.

In this article, we explore what quiet quitting and quiet cracking mean, how they differ, and what organizations can do to strengthen engagement, motivation, and overall workplace well-being.

Understanding the difference

Quiet quitting happens when employees meet their basic job requirements but withdraw from additional effort. They still show up, but the enthusiasm that drove collaboration and creativity has faded. Picture a team member who used to offer ideas in meetings or volunteer for projects but now contributes only when directly asked. This shift often develops when motivation declines over time due to changing priorities, limited growth, or a loss of connection to the work itself.

This type of disengagement can surface when employees begin to feel that their extra effort has little impact, or when opportunities for recognition or growth are unclear.

Quiet cracking, on the other hand, reflects what happens when employees can't disengage. They keep pushing through exhaustion because stepping back feels impossible. According to recent TalentLMS data, 54% of U.S. employees experience some level of quiet cracking at work, and one in five say they experience it frequently. Many stay in their role because of financial pressure, job insecurity, or limited alternatives. For instance, an employee might endure long hours, chronic stress, or even health issues, fearing that leaving would jeopardize their stability or their family's well-being. They appear dependable on the surface but are internally collapsing from prolonged strain.

Experts describe this pattern as a form of workplace financial stress, where personal or economic pressures make it difficult for employees to step back or seek balance. Over time, the strain of sustaining performance under pressure can quietly affect well-being and engagement.

In simple terms, quiet quitting is the decision to pull back; quiet cracking is the inability to do so. Both carry hidden costs for organizations, draining energy, creativity, and trust—the foundations of a healthy, motivated workforce.

The Organizational Impact

Disengagement rarely happens overnight. It develops gradually through missed conversations, unclear goals, lack of recognition, and uncertainty around job responsibilities. Over time, the effects ripple across teams and operations:

- **Reduced productivity:** Employees who feel detached contribute less energy and creativity.
- **Lower morale:** Disengagement is contagious. When a few employees withdraw, others notice and may follow suit.
- **Higher turnover:** A culture of low motivation eventually drives employees to seek meaning elsewhere.
- **Increased burnout:** Those who remain committed often compensate for others' disengagement, leading to exhaustion and resentment.

Recognizing the Signs

Many employees who quietly quit or crack do not vocalize their dissatisfaction. Instead, their behaviours shift in many different ways:

- Declining participation in meetings or team discussions
- Fewer contributions of new ideas or solutions
- Reduced willingness to collaborate beyond assigned tasks
- Flat emotional tone, irritability, or visible fatigue
- Reluctance to take on training or development opportunities
- Frequent cynicism or withdrawal from social interactions
- Consistent completion of tasks without initiative or care

Leaders can benefit from paying attention not only to performance metrics but also to the emotional pulse of their teams, while encouraging employees to voice challenges and share ideas openly. The absence of visible conflict doesn't always mean all is well.

Understanding the Root Causes

Disengagement is often a symptom of unmet needs. Common underlying causes include:

- **Lack of recognition or appreciation:** When employees don't feel their contributions are noticed or valued, they may naturally put less energy into their work.
- **Role ambiguity:** Unclear responsibilities or shifting expectations—for example, in increasingly AI-driven environments—can lead to confusion, hesitation, and lower confidence in decision-making.
- **Poor communication:** Inconsistent messaging or unclear expectations create confusion and frustration.
- **Limited growth opportunities:** Without pathways for advancement or skill development, motivation fades.
- **Overload and burnout:** Sustained pressure without adequate recovery leads to exhaustion and eventual withdrawal.
- **Weak connection to purpose:** Employees who don't see meaning in their work are less likely to remain emotionally invested.

Recognizing these early warning signs allows leaders to intervene with clarity, support, and meaningful dialogue before disengagement becomes long-term burnout.



Steps to Rebuild Motivation and Improve Organizational Health

Preventing and addressing disengagement requires collective effort—it's both an organizational and individual responsibility. Leaders play a decisive role in shaping the environment, while employees contribute by communicating needs and taking part in problem-solving.

Below are practical, evidence-based strategies to strengthen engagement and motivation.

1. Build Trust and Psychological Safety

Engagement thrives in workplaces where employees feel safe to share ideas and concerns. Leaders can create that environment by:

- Holding regular one-on-one conversations that go beyond performance updates.
- Asking open questions such as, “What parts of your work feel most meaningful?” or “What’s been draining your energy lately?”
- Listening actively and following up on feedback.
- Being transparent about decisions, even when the answers aren’t ideal.

Trust is built through consistency. When employees see that leaders act on what they hear, motivation increases naturally.

2. Clarify Purpose and Contribution

Employees are more engaged when they understand how their work connects to the bigger picture. To build that clarity:

- Revisit and communicate the organization’s mission, core values, and strategic goals regularly.
- Connect team goals to broader outcomes—showing how individual contributions make a difference.
- Celebrate small wins publicly to reinforce a sense of impact.
- Provide opportunities for employees to share how their work supports clients, communities, or colleagues.

When people can answer “why” their work matters, their sense of purpose strengthens.

3. Empower Autonomy and Ownership

Micromanagement can reduce motivation. Empowering employees to make decisions fosters trust, accountability, and innovation. Leaders can:

- Offer flexibility in how tasks are completed, focusing on outcomes instead of rigid processes.
- Encourage employees to propose improvements or test new approaches.
- Include teams in decision-making, especially when changes affect their work.

- Use process maps to show how each role fits within evolving workflows.

A culture of autonomy signals confidence and respect, two key drivers of engagement.

4. Recognize and Reinforce Effort

Recognition does not have to be elaborate. What matters is sincerity and timeliness. Research shows that consistent acknowledgment can significantly increase discretionary effort.

- Offer immediate praise for effort and collaboration, not just outcomes.
- Tailor recognition to individual preferences—some appreciate public acknowledgment, others prefer a private note.
- Encourage peer recognition to strengthen relationships within teams.
- Use recognition moments to reinforce organizational values and purpose.

When appreciation becomes part of daily interactions, employees feel seen and motivated to contribute.

5. Support Well-Being and Boundaries

Employees who feel supported in their well-being are more resilient and productive. Leaders can promote balance and prevent quiet cracking by:

- Encouraging reasonable workloads and realistic timelines.
- Respecting boundaries around personal time and remote availability.
- Promoting mental health resources through the organization’s Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP).
- Checking in proactively with team members who show signs of fatigue or isolation.

Integrating well-being into leadership practices ensures that engagement is sustainable, not situational.

6. Promote Growth and Learning

Growth fuels motivation. Employees who see a path for development are more likely to stay engaged and committed.

- Offer learning opportunities, by including formal training, mentorship, or stretch projects.
- Create space for employees to identify their own learning goals.
- Recognize skill development as a performance outcome, not a side activity.
- Encourage job crafting, where employees can adapt tasks to better align with their strengths.

Continuous learning keeps people challenged, invested, and future-focused.

7. Strengthen Manager Capability

Managers have the strongest influence on day-to-day engagement. Equipping them with the right tools and mindsets is essential.

- Train managers to identify early signs of disengagement.
- Teach active listening, conflict resolution, and motivational coaching skills.
- Include engagement and well-being measures in manager performance evaluations.
- Provide peer forums for managers to share challenges and strategies.

When managers model empathy, accountability, and balance, employees are more likely to follow.

8. Review Systems and Structures

Engagement extends beyond individual relationships and is influenced by the organization's broader systems and practices. HR and leadership teams can:

- Conduct regular reviews of workload distribution and recognition policies.
- Address inequities that contribute to resentment or demotivation.
- Reassess job design to ensure alignment between responsibilities and resources.
- Evaluate hybrid and remote work models for fairness, flexibility, and inclusion.

Creating fair and transparent systems builds trust and shows employees that the organization values their well-being.

Maintaining Engagement

Quiet quitting and quiet cracking have become part of the modern workplace vocabulary because they capture how deeply the nature of work has evolved. Employees want more than stability: they seek balance, growth, and meaning. In many cases, disengagement points to areas within the work environment that could benefit from renewed attention or support.

Organizations that thrive in this evolving environment understand that motivation must be nurtured through care, clarity, and consistency. They listen closely to their people, respond to changing needs, and view engagement as a shared commitment that requires ongoing attention.

Creating and sustaining that kind of environment takes intention and support. Through workshops and leadership training, Homewood Health helps employers and leaders strengthen organizational health, improve team relationships, and build confidence in leading through change. Our experts provide insight, practical tools, and tailored guidance to help leaders foster workplaces where people feel valued, supported, and ready to perform at their best. To learn more about how we can help your organization, contact your Homewood Health representative.

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