

MTEV7: What Are Quiet Quitting And Quiet Firing?

Rachel Salaman 00:06

Hello and welcome to the Mind Tools Expert Voices podcast with me, Rachel Salaman...

Jonathan Hancock 00:11

... and me, Jonathan Hancock. I'm a writer and editor at Mind Tools, working across all the resources in our toolkit.

Rachel Salaman 00:18

And I'm the presenter of all our Expert Interviews. For more than 16 years, I've talked to writers, academics, consultants, and thought leaders, on a wide range of workplace topics.

Jonathan Hancock 00:31

So our archives are now chock-full of insights and ideas that we can mine to tackle the issues that people are talking about today.

Rachel Salaman 00:39

And in this episode of Expert Voices, we're going to discuss two highly topical buzz phrases: "quiet quitting" and "quiet firing." What do they mean? How might they affect us? And how do we navigate these challenging aspects of modern-day working life?

I'm going to start with "quiet quitting." And I found some illuminating clips to share from the full-length Expert Interviews.

Jonathan Hancock 01:06

And then I'll reveal insights I've collected to cast light on "quiet firing." And whether you're a manager or team member, I think both quiet quitting and quiet firing are things that you really need to know about!

Rachel Salaman 01:18

So, let's get started! This is Mind Tools Expert Voices: "What Are Quiet Quitting...

Jonathan Hancock 01:26

... and Quiet Firing?"

Rachel Salaman 01:31

So, what **is** quiet quitting? Well, this refers to people who put no more effort into their jobs than absolutely necessary. They're still on the payroll, but they're doing the bare minimum, and they're not engaged.

And Gallup, the market research company – they've been measuring employee engagement for years; you may have heard of their surveys over the years. And it was really interesting, I thought, that last year, they use the term “quiet quitters” in their survey results, instead of a lack of engagement: they kind of used quiet quitting, if anonymously. And they found that at least half of the U.S. workforce consists of quiet quitters! So a huge number.

Jonathan Hancock 02:16

Is that an active decision that somebody makes then, do you think, to quietly quit from their job?

Rachel Salaman 02:20

I think it probably differs, doesn't it? I think some people probably are, like, “I'd like a little bit more time doing other things with my head space.” And others, they just find themselves just less engaged.

Jonathan Hancock 02:33

I guess in some cases, it might be absolutely fair enough. You know, you've done your work, and people are asking you to do more – but actually you're going to stick to your guns and just give them that much. And then keep enough for you outside of work.

At other times, it might be a really problematic thing, if you're actively not doing quite as much as you should, and you're not doing that little bit extra that is actually part of your job as well – just to check that things are OK and to be looking out to help people and solve problems... And if you're not doing that, **you** may be fine. But your colleagues and your business might not be!

Rachel Salaman 03:04

Yes, there's certainly lots to explore in this. And as we're going to be focusing on engagement – for want of a better word – today, I wanted to share a bit of our Mind Tools Expert Interview that I did with former chairman and CEO of American Express bank, Steve Goldstein.

He's been a senior executive at other global companies, too, including Sears and Citigroup. And he's the author of the book, “Why Are There Snowblowers in Miami?” It's a great title for a book, I think, and it comes from an experience he had when he was visiting a Sears store as a Sears executive, when he was in Miami to give a speech to a trade association. And in the garden department of this Sears were four snowblowers...

Steve Goldstein 03:53

And so I went over to a salesman, sort of an older fellow, and his name... he had his name badge: Pete. And I said, “Hi, Pete,” I introduced myself, and I said, “Why are there snowblowers in Miami?”

And he looked at me, he goes, “Well, we get them in September, we're told to put them on the floor. And we box them back up in April and send them back to headquarters.”

And I said, “Well, how long has this been going on?”

And he said, “Well, I've been here about 30 years. So as long as I've been here.”

And I said, “Well, what do you do about it?”

And he says, “Well, my boss calls headquarters and the store manager calls headquarters. And they tell him it's part of the national allocation.”

And I said, “Well, do you know what that means?” And he said, “No.”

So you know, I left, I gave my speech. I went back the next day to headquarters. And walking back to my office, I was really very disturbed. And I asked my assistant to stop what she was doing and to find out, in the history of recorded weather, how many times had it snowed in Miami.

And she came back in about 45 minutes and said it's snowed one time, seven years ago, a third of an inch. And so that made an indelible mark in my mind. And I started to think about all of the experiences I'd had prior to that. And then all of the experiences I've had subsequent to that. And I realized that there's a real problem related to disengagement.

Rachel Salaman 05:23

So Pete, in that story is an example of a quiet quitter, I would say. He doesn't actually quit. He's out there selling things to people. But he does the bare minimum, he sees what could be improved – he must see that – but he doesn't do anything about it.

Jonathan Hancock 05:41

There's an element of things just not being the right things in the right place and people not doing the right, useful jobs... and that, I guess, is a big part of feeling really disengaged.

Rachel Salaman 05:50

Yes. And nowadays, that kind of disengagement – or stepping back, if you like – is much easier to do when you're working from home or in a hybrid situation, because most of the time, no one can see whether you're working or not.

Jonathan Hancock 06:05

And maybe, again, that is a kind of double-sided coin, because in some ways it's really good that, if we're at home, we can make decisions about how we use our time and our energy. And we can maybe take a little step back sometimes, as long as we do the work and really do it well.

And other times, we can do a bit extra, but it's under our control, and no one's watching us. On the other side, though, if things aren't up to par, or you're having problems, there's no one there to see you and to pull you up or to support you in those cases.

And a bit later, when I talk to this question of quiet firing, and we get some experts from the archives who talk about that, you'll hear that at least one of them talks about the extra problems that come in the virtual world. So I think it's definitely worth bearing this in mind – how many of us work these days – I'm sure it's making quiet quitting and quiet firing even more important to think about.

Rachel Salaman 06:53

Yeah. So I guess the big question is, does it really matter if this person is disengaging, or not? Well, someone who's looked into this a great deal is Teresa Amabile, who is the Edsel Bryant Ford Professor of Business Administration, and a director of research, at Harvard Business School.

And she's the co-author of "The Progress Principle: Using small wins to ignite joy, engagement and creativity at work." Now, for that book, she did a lot of research on what she calls "inner work life," which she defines as "the confluence of people's emotions, perceptions and motivations as they experience the events in their workday." And she found that our inner work life really matters when it comes to engaging with our work.

Teresa Amabile 07:45

We found that, when people have more positive emotions, more positive perceptions of the organization and their co-workers and their bosses, and when they have stronger intrinsic motivation, they are much more likely to be creative on that day, to be productive, to be committed to the work and collegial within their own work environment.

Rachel Salaman 08:11

So that's pretty definitive, I would say: a better inner work life leads to less quiet quitting, because you're more motivated and more engaged.

Jonathan Hancock 08:20

Yeah, I suppose so. Or if you're really happy, maybe all of those things are also "confluencing"... "confluing," ... what was her word for it? Flowing together beautifully. You're really happy, everything's sorted, you just don't feel like doing anything extra – but you might still get labeled as a quiet quitter. I don't know...

Rachel Salaman 08:36

Yes. But I think, for our purposes today, let's think of quiet quitting as a problem. It's the problematic type of quite quitting. And can anyone do anything about it? Can we do anything about it if we find ourselves quiet quitting, and we don't want to? And if we're managers, and we spot other people doing it, can we help them pull away from that negative behavior?

So, if you are a manager, and you notice that someone on your team is quiet quitting, how can you improve their "inner work life" and make them care again? Well, it's surprisingly simple, according to Teresa Amabile.

Teresa Amabile 09:17

We found that the single most important event in boosting inner work life was simply making progress on meaningful work. Simply having some kind of step forward in work that the person cared about. Even a small win could have a major positive impact on someone's inner work life.

So, managers can use this by not worrying about trying to get inside people's heads and not worrying about becoming an emotional intelligence genius; simply supporting people in making progress on meaningful work.

Rachel Salaman 10:00

So you can imagine, can't you, Jonathan, how that tip would really help knowledge workers, because knowledge work often has progress built into it towards a goal of some kind – like a project, or getting a product to market. But perhaps not so much Pete, on the shop floor of Sears back in Miami! So what do you do about the quiet quitters whose job isn't about “progressing”?

How's this for an idea: if you notice that someone is just treading water... just ask them what would make their job more satisfying?!

Jonathan Hancock 10:33

Wow! What, actually talk to them? [Laughs] Ground-breaking stuff!

Rachel Salaman 10:35

[Laughs] Yes! How's that for an idea? And this would surely improve their inner work life, we would hope. Now, this was a suggestion from Tim Baker, who's a consultant and the author of “Bringing the Human Back to Work.”

Tim Baker 10:47

Why don't we just sit down and ask people how their job satisfaction is? Why don't we ask them about morale? Why don't we ask them about communication? And so it's a nice easy conversation – should be! – to have. And it gives a very good gauge on where people are at that time.

Of course, job satisfaction ebbs and flows. But it's just good to get a handle – because after asking, on a scale of one to 10, how they rate their current job satisfaction, the next question is: why? And that is... that gives an insight for the manager on what they think is important. And then, of course, the next set of questions around “What might we do about that?” Or, “Do you think it could ever go from a six to a seven?” Some employees think seven's as good as it gets, and you've got to respect that again. But the point is, if it's a six, “How do we get you to a seven?” and so forth.

Rachel Salaman 11:42

Sometimes it's the simplest things, isn't it?

Jonathan Hancock 11:45

And it's all very basic, but also really important. You know, just that idea of: people, to stay engaged have to feel like they're moving forward! You know, when you say it like that, it's sort of obvious. But how often is that the absolute problem for people: that they just can't see that they're achieving anything?! And there's Pete and his snowblower... He brings it out, he puts it back, he can't see things moving forward.

Maybe for just certain times as well; that's why it's important to have that conversation often. I think there can be times when you just slip into a little period of not being able to see how you're advancing anything and what your purpose is. And, very quickly, you get into that disengaged state – and there is quiet quitting!

Rachel Salaman 12:23

Yes, absolutely. Well, another approach that the Mind Tools expert interviewees suggested that would work anywhere is to boost connection. And if you think about it, connecting is literally the opposite of quitting, quiet or otherwise, isn't it? The psychiatrist Dr Edward – or Ned – Hallowell is the author of a book called "Shine: Using brain science to get the best from your people." He and I talk about the importance of connection in this clip from our Mind Tools Expert Interview.

Ned Hallowell 12:56

It's odd, because in today's world we live in a paradox: we're super connected electronically, but we're increasingly disconnected interpersonally. By connection, I mean that it's an emotion, it's a feeling state, where you feel engaged, feel involved... feel, you know, emotionally connected to the group, the task.

Rachel Salaman 13:19

[In the interview] And it's interesting, because you talk a lot about social networks, which a lot of people now associate with the internet. But actually, in your book, you're talking about social networks that happen face to face rather than online, aren't you?

Ned Hallowell 13:32

Absolutely, absolutely. And they are the ones that really convey the great benefit in terms of peak performance. Now, online electronics can help promote that, to be sure. You know, that's sort of the miracle of our age. So I'm not disparaging those whatsoever. What I am saying is: be careful that you don't have the social networks replace face-to-face communication; replace that feeling of enthusiasm, commitment, excitement, when you walk in the door at work.

Rachel Salaman 14:07

I thought that raised a few issues for remote and hybrid work situations, doesn't it?

Jonathan Hancock 14:13

Well, it does. It made me think that if you're disconnected, then obviously that's going to make you – socially disconnected – that's going to make you feel like quiet quitting. But also, if you're technically disconnected as well, you know... you're working remotely and you're not seeing people all the time... that kind of allows it to happen as well. So it also feeds into the same thing of: I can't see people, I'm feeling bad – but my manager also can't see me, and I can... I can maybe just drift off into other things. So really complex challenges in the virtual world, I think, for this.

And it just also made me think the opposite. It's quite hard to want to quiet quit somewhere where you feel really connected and really known by people, and, you know, they see you, you see them, you have fun together... all those bits of connection. I think back to the times in my career when I felt most connected. However bad other things had been in the business, I wouldn't have quiet quit, because I love that feeling of connection. And also, I was so connected, that I wouldn't have been **allowed** to quiet quit because people would have stopped me!

Rachel Salaman 15:08

Yes! Well, we'll be hearing from a virtual-meeting expert in a bit; get some tips from him. But for organizations that do have some in-office work going on, here on Ned Halliwell's tips for increasing connection.

Ned Halliwell 15:23

It depends upon the workplace that you're in, you know. The smaller the workplace, the easier it is to do. You know, if you have a workplace that has 10 people in it, you just have a pizza lunch every Friday, you know, or you go out, you know, together or... or you just make a point of getting to know one another. As the organizations grow, it becomes more difficult. And really what you need to do in bigger and bigger organizations is create small pockets. When I was at Harvard as an undergraduate, they had a house system. So the big college suddenly became a collection of small houses. And each house would have its feeling of connection. And that's a good example of what you need to do in large corporations. You break them down into smaller teams, and then the team creates its own feeling of connection.

Rachel Salaman 16:16

So, if you can create a culture of connection, it's much harder to hide. And, hopefully, employees wouldn't want to hide anymore, like you were saying, because they'd feel valued and included.

Jonathan Hancock 16:27

Yeah. And I liked his point that connection will be different in different sorts of organizations, in different industries. And for different people, I guess – for extroverts and introverts... They'll want different sorts of connection. So it's always worth bearing that in mind when you're connecting people. Do they want it? Is it helping them?

Rachel Salaman 16:42

Yes, and perhaps a better way of looking at this is actually talking about inclusion. And that's another way to fight quiet quitting. Because, like connection, it's about people being heard and seen. And I'd like to bring in Susan Scott here. She's the author of "Fierce Conversations" and "Fierce Leadership." And in this clip from our Mind Tools Expert Interview, she's pretty fierce, in her opinion, that engagement is about active inclusion, not "just another survey."

Teresa Amabile 17:15

We need to stop talking about employee engagement and start actually engaging and including people. Don't just invite the "usual suspects" to your meetings, but think about who else might bring a valuable perspective. And err on the side of inviting more people than fewer people, and tell them, you know: "Really... we really want to get this right for the organization. And so I'm going to tell you, what I would do if I had to make a decision today without your input, and then your value in this meeting is to tell me what I'm missing, or what you have seen that is entirely different from what I'm saying. And I really invite you to contradict me, because I hope to be different, when this conversation is over. I hope that you'll influence me. And that together, we will pool our brain cells and come up with the best possible decision."

And it wakes people up. So not only are people engaged and included – literally engaged, literally included – but the company does end up making the best decisions and actually implementing them. Because I think of: engagement plus inclusion equals execution muscle.

And if I don't have engaged and included employees, I won't have execution muscle. I can have the most brilliant ideas, but when it comes time to make them happen, things will really drag because people are not putting their... not only their heads and their backs, but their hearts into what we have to do – particularly when things get rough, as they will from time to time.

Rachel Salaman 18:51

It's interesting that Susan hints at the emotional side of work life there, talking about people putting their hearts into their work. They really have to care, and in a way you could think of quiet quitting as stopping caring in a way, don't you think?

Jonathan Hancock 19:07

Yeah. And also it means you've got to have some ups and downs in there. You talked about contradictions – and I'm not sure I would be brave enough to contradict Susan Scott, though! [Laughs] She paints a really powerful positive picture of a place where that sort of thing is OK, and you can have... you can have arguments, if they're done constructively and respectfully. And there's... there's that kind of dynamic to life. And that, to me, means that sort of living organization where people... You may have moments when you're not that happy, but you're still connected and engaged and you're still involved in it all, I suppose, quite deeply. You haven't just been allowed to drift off and it's boring and pointless and... there you go, quiet quitting.

Rachel Salaman 19:43

Yeah. And I think that you could try some of Susan's tips there, like inviting people to speak up, actually; inviting people by name to speak up. You could try some of that in a remote environment.

Well, I said we'd be hearing from a virtual-meeting expert, and now's the time! He's called Wayne Turmel, and I spoke to him about his book "Meet Like You Mean It." He shared some of his tips for making sure people don't fall off the radar.

Wayne Turmel 20:13

In online meetings, you've got to remember you want to engage people visually, auditorily and kinesthetically. So, webcams are immensely helpful. They're not mandatory for everything, right? If you've got a big town hall meeting, you might want your speakers visible; doesn't matter if all 100 people are visible. But webcams... the smaller the group, the more critical. Those are, I think... chat is a hugely valuable tool, and especially on international teams; chat is immensely valuable. Because a lot of people working in a different language, their written English is better than their spoken English. If you are an introvert, in chat, people can write something, take a look at it, say "Is that what I really want to say? OK," and hit send. I very frequently send a chat message to somebody and say, "Hey, Raj, you were at this meeting. Do you mind if I asked you about it?" And he sends back a chat message, says, "No, that's fine." So I go, "Raj, you were at that meeting? What do you think about it?"

Rachel Salaman 21:46 [Matthew – you'll need to take 26 seconds off this time stamp, and all the rest from this point on]

[In the interview] So chat is just as useful for private messaging as for group or public messaging in a meeting?

Wayne Turmel 21:53

Absolutely. And a lot of new meeting leaders tend to get very paranoid about the chat. “Well, what if they talk about me behind my back?” You don't think they're doing that anyway?! But the other... the other thing is that you can lessen your blood pressure as the meeting leader by having somebody whose job is to monitor the chat.

So I say, “Rachel, would you keep an eye on the chat? And if somebody says something that should get our attention, stop me and say, ‘Hey, Wayne, Bob said something in the chat,’”or, Bob has a question.” And that way, I'm not trying to speak, listen, remember what I'm going to say, read the chat, write on the whiteboard... ” Because that's, you know... my head will explode!

Rachel Salaman 22:38

That was a useful tip, asking your team member to manage the chat, because it might make people engage more. I guess it just doesn't feel so much like an imposition or making work for the person chairing the meeting, if you know that there's a kind of dedicated person who's going to be managing the engagement.

Jonathan Hancock 22:55

I guess it's part of a whole approach that's always looking out for ways to give people jobs, isn't it? And keeping people involved in all sorts of ways?

Rachel Salaman 23:03

Yes. Yeah. Well, as I come to the end of my selection, I just wanted to put us in the shoes of the person who is quiet quitting. What's next for them? Floating through 30 years of disengagement, like Pete in that Sears in Miami?

Jonathan Hancock 23:19

Yeah, I worry about Pete. I think about him a lot!

Rachel Salaman 23:22

[Laughs] Yes, well, happiness expert, Annie McKee, who is the author of "How to Be happy at Work," thinks life's too short for that!

Annie McKee 23:31

If we think that we're heading in the wrong direction, the first thing we need to do is to try... try to understand what's wrong. It's very easy to point up at that manager or that organizational culture, whatever it happens to be, and blame others or blame our situation for our own unhappiness. And while there may be some truth to that, you know... that manager may not be the best manager in the world, or that boss may actually be toxic... we still have to take charge of our own happiness, we have to look deep, we have to look around to see what we can do to make our lives at work better.

Rachel Salaman 24:10

Because actually, how you spend a big chunk of your life does matter, doesn't it?

Jonathan Hancock 24:14

Yeah. And I do think it's something that you need to keep checking about yourself... sort of checking in with your own feelings – because it's, I think, it's quite easy to be drifting along and everything's basically OK, and sometimes to be really enthused and really engaged... but also one or two things can change and, almost overnight, you can be in that disengaged, disconnected, invisible, pointless, “quiet quit” place.

Rachel Salaman 24:35

And sometimes that might mean **actually** quitting, of course! So one last clip then from Angie Morgan, who's the co-author of a book called “Bet on You,” which she wrote with her long-term business partner Courtney Lynch. It's full of anecdotes from their own work lives. And a surprising number of those anecdotes involves them quitting! So how do they know **when** to quit?

Angie Morgan 25:02

So Courtney, in the book, writes a really wonderful, poignant phrase, you know: “You quit when it sucks.” If you make the decision, and you take the risk, and you're just not finding the joy and satisfaction, you don't have to stay on that path. You've got the experience, you can make a graceless pivot, as we call it: graceless pivot.

I've done this plenty of times in my life. I'm a runner; there's plenty of times that I've signed up for races and things just get busy, I don't have the time to train, suddenly training is more stressful than it should be... and I'm just like, “You know what, this is not the time to pursue this activity.” And you back out – there's nothing wrong with that! I don't think of it as quitting in any of these endeavors. I think about: “Well, this didn't work out; I learned something – I can grow from the experience.”

Rachel Salaman 25:52

So maybe sometimes there is too much stigma around quitting, when it would be the best thing for you to do.

Jonathan Hancock 25:58

And how refreshing to call it a “graceless pivot”! You don't have to find an elegant way to do it, if it's going to make you happy quickly, you know... as long as you follow all the basic rules. You could just get out of there and move towards happiness. I agree. And that has to be the other side to quiet quitting, doesn't it? If you're that unhappy that disengaged, you know, you've got to do something. Don't just secretly quit, **really** quit!

Rachel Salaman 26:25

Yeah. So, so far, Jonathan, we've heard how quiet quitting is disengagement. And it can have a profound impact on the person doing it, and their organization. That inner work life suffers, making them less creative, less productive, and more miserable.

We've heard some tips for managers who need to deal with a quiet quitter, including what to do in online meetings. And we've also heard how, ultimately, it's up to us to take responsibility for our happiness and engagement at work. And if we need to find a new job to reignite our engagement with our career, perhaps we just need to muster the courage to do that.

Jonathan Hancock 27:04

Yeah, loads of good food for thought there. And it really helped me, I think, to get my head around this idea, because you hear so much about quiet quitting. I think that really has helped me get all the nuances of it and really understand the signs and what to do about it. And it's definitely brought some of my own experiences back to mind as well – about times when I've definitely been in that area. And whether I would have done the right thing or not... I'm not sure! But I will know next time. So, excellent advice from the experts you chose from the Mind Tools archives.

Remember, you can listen to all those full-length Expert Interviews, whatever you're interested in, struggling with, or just need to know more about... they're all there. And we're bound to have a world leading expert that you can learn from in the Mind Tools archives. So find out about joining Mind Tools and getting access to all the interviews, plus the articles, videos, workbooks, quizzes, infographics, the full caboodle... at mindtools.com!

Rachel Salaman 28:03

And now from quiet quitting to quiet firing. That's what you focused on, Jonathan. So which of our experts can help us tackle that thorny topic?

Jonathan Hancock 28:12

Well, Robert Bruce Shaw, Natalie Holder-Winfield, Mark Brouker, Kate Sweetman, Yael Zofi, Mimi Nicklin, and Frances Frei. How's that for an expert panel?

Rachel Salaman 28:22

Amazing!

Jonathan Hancock 28:03

Thank you. They've all got useful things to say, I think, about something that I have to admit I'd heard about – but wasn't entirely sure about to begin with. You know, what exactly is **quiet firing**? Well, like you, I did some research. And it seems that people use the term “quiet firing” to mean several different things.

So it can be when a manager is just very careless about someone's support and their training and development. So they're inadvertently blocking their career; they're sort of firing them that way.

It can also be when a manager is just unaware of the barriers that someone's facing to doing their job well, or even just doing it at all. And so they leave that person to become ineffective and invisible.

But it can also be an active – and really quite underhand – attempt to force someone out of their job. It seems, you know, there are people out there apparently who will cut off opportunities... they'll provide

sub-par working conditions... basically do all sorts of things that prevent a person from being successful, to make them want to quit without actually firing them!

So there are lots of different aspects of this. Obviously, in many places, there are laws to protect you if you feel like you are being treated unfairly or being forced out in that way. And that sort of behavior is fairly rare – and you need to get advice and support if you think it's happening to you.

But I think what's much more common is a kind of accidental quiet firing, where a boss just doesn't provide someone with the support they need to thrive and perform at their best. They take their eye off them. And it all builds to the point where that person is still being paid, but it's like they've been fired because their boss doesn't seem to know or care that they're even there.

So why does that kind of quiet firing happen? Well, maybe a manager has blind spots. And that was a major concern for one of the experts that you spoke to, Rachel: Robert Bruce Shaw, who you met up with in London face to face to talk about his book, “Leadership Blind Spots: How successful leaders identify and overcome the weaknesses that matter.” And here's how Robert says some of these really serious blind spots come about.

Robert Bruce Shaw 30:25

If you divide it broadly, there are two major drivers. One is psychological. And within that, you find that people when they have a great deal – cognitively – they're dealing with, they have a tendency to exclude some information. It's cognitive overload. The other piece of the psychological blind spots is more emotional. So, the things that you just don't want to see because they conflict with how you view yourself or how you've invested either your time or your resources, and so on. So there's a psychological component.

There's also an organizational component. And in that case, you find that information is filtered as it goes up the hierarchy. You find that people, when they're dealing with figures of authority, often will not tell the complete truth. So you get both psychological and organizational factors that contribute to blind spots.

Rachel Salaman 31:07

Yeah, they can all feed into each other, can't they? Because if, you know... if you don't particularly like someone and you haven't got much time, then those are the people you're kind of quiet firing, aren't they?

Jonathan Hancock 31:18

Well, another angle for managers to consider, I think, is maybe you've become cut off from some people, because they're particularly **different** from you.

Rachel, you spoke to Natalie Holder-Winfield about that. She's an employment lawyer who helps organizations become truly inclusive. And she wrote, “Exclusion: Strategies for improving diversity in recruitment, retention and promotion.” And she talked in that interview about “out” groups and “in” groups – the out groups being people who seem different from others in some way, so they're sort of on the outside all the time.

And, as a manager, Natalie said, you may need to change from... and here are some interesting titles... from an “entity theorist” to an “incremental theorist” in order to fully engage with everyone. Because, she says, entity... well, you’ll hear her explain this, entity theorists don't really find out about people, whereas incremental theorists **do**, and they engage, and they don't accidentally fire anybody!

Natalie Holder-Winfield 32:14

The person is afraid to take the chance to get to know the person, the algorithm. That's what we call an “entity theorist.” That's the person who really tries to avoid encounters with people who are not familiar to their experiences and their backgrounds for a number of different reasons. And so therefore, with them, it's very difficult to overcome those biases, because through more experiences, through more exposure, that's where we're able to actually create new and different thoughts and ideas about those who are in our groups.

However, the “incremental theorist” is someone who's curious and understands that bias is something that can be eradicated. It's something that can be lessened over time with more exposure, more experiences, and with more touch points to that which seems different to them. When we find that, it's a lot easier to relate to someone, it's a lot easier for us to put ourselves in their shoes, and say, “No, I kind of made that mistake a few years ago, or when I first started out my career.” And it's easier for us to... I wouldn't say “overlook” but for us as to **forgive**. However, when we don't resonate, when we don't feel that someone is a part of our “in group,” it's much harder for us to trust that they won't make that mistake again, because we're so unfamiliar with them.

Rachel Salaman 33:30

You just have to get to know people, especially if you feel that they're different from yourself.

Jonathan Hancock 33:35

So it's not a case of just not quietly firing somebody; you've actually got to do positive things to prevent that from happening. If you just let your organization go on, and these little pockets of out groups continue, if you let that happen, then you're sort of feeding into people getting quietly fired – because you've either forgotten about them, and they realize that, or you've been unfair to them. And I thought that was really interesting when she said that the data, that the research, does show that we are more unfair to people that we feel are different from us, and we're more unforgiving as well.

Rachel Salaman 34:09

Yes, it definitely rings true. Yeah.

Jonathan Hancock 34:12

Well, an antidote to that might be curiosity. Captain Mark Brouker told you about that, Rachel. He said managers need to be curious about everybody in the organization, you know: out groups, in groups, everybody! They just need to keep finding out about them.

He spent much of his career as a senior leader in the U.S. Navy, mostly in big naval hospitals. He was commanding officer at one of the largest naval hospitals in the world. And he now applies what he learned from those experiences in the civilian world through his own consultancy firm, Brouker

Leadership Solutions. And Rachel, in your Expert Interview he told you about his curiosity-led approach to management.

Mark Brouker 34:51

Truthfully, I got energy by walking around and talking to people and engaging with people and finding out really what's going on. Because that's the whole... that's the mystery, the dirty little secret... is the higher up you get in an organization, the more difficult it is to find out what's really going on. And one way to do that is just walking around.

And there's so many stories I have of how I unearth things. Again, no one's trying to keep things from you – just, you know, the communication links are just not as solid as they are... people are busy and whatnot... But you want to find out what's going on. And that's a great way to do it.

And my job was... I had 3,000 officers that I was in charge of to make sure they were, you know... the Navy moves people on every two or three years in the U.S. Navy. And that's pretty disruptive to people's families and stuff.

So my job was to match a good job with someone's professional desires, family needs, and whatnot. And what I learned was my normal conversation early in that job was to kind of say, "Hey, here's what's going on, here's a good job for you, it'd be great for you and your family, blah, blah." And then they had a conversation; they'd say, "Well, I have a child with... " you know, some pretty significant disease, which means they couldn't go there. So what I learned from that job was I need to listen to people's desires and needs, and then try to make the fit for the Navy.

Jonathan Hancock 36:10

So if you don't know the barrier to someone doing their job, and you get them – like he said there – you get them to do something, you give them a new post, a new project to work on, and they can't do it, you've basically fired them, haven't you?!

Rachel Salaman 36:20

Yeah. Wow, it's true.

Jonathan Hancock 36:23

And sometimes it **is** just as simple as asking people. Now, he's obviously a master at that, because he's got thousands of people, and somehow he walks around talking to them all. And he painted a very positive picture. I wonder, in practice, how he did that; how on earth did he find the time to speak to all of those people? But I think it's a great principle if you can do it. And in the interview, he talked to you about just seizing those opportunities when they arise, and using his memory as well – all those great "people skills" – to listen attentively and remember what people say, and then do his best to try and engage with the barriers that they faced.

Rachel Salaman 36:55

Yes. I think if you do engage, like Mark did in that job, you do remember people more easily because you're truly listening. And I think when you listen, you remember, and it turns into a bit of a virtuous circle.

Jonathan Hancock 37:10

And what a difference it makes if your boss remembers your name, knows things about you... Again, it's that other side of quiet quitting: you don't want to quiet quit from a boss that's that engaged and that invested in your success.

Well, Kate Sweetman reckons that another reason you won't accidentally quiet fire someone is if you've got a clear strategy for your business. You need to know what you need your people to do... and then tell them!

Well, Kate's a former editor at Harvard Business Review, and co-author with Dave Ulrich and Norm Smallwood of "The Leadership Code: Five rules to lead by."

Kate Sweetman 37:46

The first question really is strategy. Where is the business going? And therefore, **what** will the key jobs be? And **where** will those key jobs be? And **how** are we going to figure out how to fill those things with people who are going to be highly capable?

Here's a great example. We did some work with Nokia. And they looked at the outside world and said, "Wow, you know, we're not a cell phone company; we're really an internet company. And we need to realize that it's really about quickly getting great applications onto these devices. And a lot of those great applications are not going to be coming from our own R&D group; they're going to be coming from people in a garage somewhere. And so we need to organize ourselves structurally and systematically to be open to those things, because right now, well, how would those people even get in?"

So they underwent a very brave, I think, relook at their strategy and their business and also a very brave relook at their human capital, to say, "How are we going to be a company that's open enough and collaborative enough that we can create fabulous external partnerships, as well as internal partnerships, to simply take advantage of opportunities as they arise that we don't even know about right now?"

Engaging today's talent is really around who goes with us on our business journey. So talent managers need to know how to engage others to get immediate results by identifying the skills, for example... drawing out the right talent, finding the right talent. Communication is obviously really important. The manager needs to... the leader needs to be able to help that person know how they fit in in this moment, and that person also needs to feel comfortable and safe enough to say, "Here's how I want to fit in," you know, "and here's the issues that I'm having, and here's where maybe I need a bit of a break, and here's how I need you to help me."

Jonathan Hancock 39:36

Again, it's that close connection between managers and people. But I also thought – from a top-level view, as well – saying that if you're a good business strategist, if your business has a clear vision and a clear plan, you're not going to accidentally fire people because then you'll know who you need, and you'll keep them on board. And again, it feeds back into them not wanting to quite quit as well. But

yeah, some more good advice about not accidentally “quiet firing” people, just by basically having a decent strategy and getting the right people in place.

Rachel Salaman 40:05

Yes, being engaged and rigorous yourself. Yeah.

Jonathan Hancock 40:07

Now at this point, I'm going to just take us back to that virtual world, and remote working and hybrid working, which we've talked about a bit already today, and how this applies in the way that many of us have to work these days. Yael Zofi spoke to you, Rachel, about virtual team leaders and some extra responsibilities they have to create connections to keep people visible – to stop anyone being set adrift, accidentally or otherwise. She's the author of “A Manager's Guide to Virtual Teams,” and the founder and CEO of AIM Strategies, a human capital consulting firm. Or should that be “humor capital”? Because she says the antidote to quiet firing is, well, fun!

Yael Zofi 40:48

Create some fun, create some history, create the conditions that if we were working in an office, and we would walk to the watercooler, or the cafe, or, you know, in some way to replicate some of that environment of interaction.

One team I worked with did virtual birthdays. Every time it was a team member's birthday, everybody got a box, the team member whose birthday it was got a little bit of a bigger box, and they all opened it at the same time during the team meeting. Some teams do things like not just always having the team meeting with everybody. They assign “break buddies” who can chat with each other during the break, or share or brainstorm.

A lot of food going on – that's also for getting team spirit. Several teams actually that I spoke to... one in particular, they did a virtual team recipe exchange globally. Everybody exchanged a recipe with each other. And they had to cook or make that recipe and then get on the call and eat that food while they're on the call and comment about it. And that shared experience grows into a relationship, and that relationship grows into an understanding, and that built into trust.

So the human level: we're still... we still connect to each other via relationships, whether they're in person or virtual.

Jonathan Hancock 42:12

All sounds good to me. I did just wonder a bit though, do the stakes keep getting raised, though? There's this trend of people sharing the stuff their bosses have done for them, and their companies have done for them – you see on social media: “Look, I got this box of cakes,” or, “I went to this party,” whatever. Is there a danger that people see that and think, “Hang on, I didn't get that at my work! Have I been quietly fired?” Do managers have to keep doing more and more? Or could managers be listening to this thinking, “Oh, can I not just basically do my job? Do I have to do all that extra stuff?”

Rachel Salaman 42:39

Yes. And some of those tips – great though they were – would have created quite a lot of extra work for the team members, cooking things. I mean, maybe people don't want to cook things and show their teammates, and it's not really part of their job. So yeah, I think there's a fine line to be walked here.

Jonathan Hancock 43:00

Yes. And I think if you do it all the time, the moment it dips, that's when people might think I've been quietly fired. Because, "This week, nothing happened," or, "Today, nothing happened." So yeah, you're right. I think it's about balance, isn't it? And getting the culture right, so that people enjoy it when it happens. It does all the right things, builds that connection and keeps people in touch and makes people know that they are valued – I suppose that's at the heart of this, isn't it?

But, after we've done all these good things, and we've kept people on side, we've maintained connections, we've checked in with people and tried to solve their problems... what happens if you do actually have to fire someone? Again, this brings us to the point that you did towards the end of your selection of clips, Rachel, where you said: "Well, what happens if you've got to quit?"

Well, for the manager, what happens when you have to fire somebody? So you're not just going to ignore them and hope they'll go away: you do have to fire them.

Well, Mimi Nicklin gave you some advice about that. She's a communication specialist with a business now based in Dubai, and she wrote "Softening the edge: How humanity's oldest leadership trait could change the world." And you remember what it was, that leadership trait?

Rachel Salaman: 44:10

Was it "empathy," by any chance?

Jonathan Hancock: 44:12

Absolutely! A word you mentioned, and she mentioned, a lot of times. It was absolutely the focus for that interview, and such an important concept. And I should point out that, from her British background, when Mimi mentions "redundancies" she's talking about layoffs.

Mimi Nicklin 44:26

The key thing is that empathy is not about agreement. And empathy is not about judgment. So when you make a decision, for example, to make somebody redundant, you can make that action, you can bring that to life, with empathy.

So, for example, I did... I had to go through a whole lot of redundancies when I took over this business and we weren't financially strong enough to maintain the people that we had. When you make those redundancies, you put that person front and center; you consider how they're experiencing that reaction, and you make the time to talk to them to coach them – whether that's helping them with their CV, put them into, you know... help them, introduce them to other contacts, help them rebuild their experience set, perhaps suggest new ways of training, extend their visa or their health insurance, if you're in a market where those things are relevant...

Make decisions, those micro decisions that are empathetic, that allow that person to move on from bad news in a business environment or a decision at a corporate level that doesn't necessarily go their way. Put yourself in their shoes, and help them move through that.

Because empathy doesn't mean, "I can never make a difficult decision." Empathy doesn't mean, "I always have to be kind." Because it's not kind to make someone redundant. But you can do it with empathy in a way that has kindness within it.

Jonathan Hancock 45:46

I find it persuasive. Did it persuade you about the importance of empathy?

Rachel Salaman 45:49

Yes, I think definitely, it's all about thinking about how this news is going to be met, isn't it, for the person being fired? And the kinder you can be and the more helpful you can be... surely that is a better situation for everyone. Makes you feel better – but it definitely makes the person being fired feel better, too.

Jonathan Hancock 46:10

Yeah, and I've worked in organizations where you could just see people being quietly fired. And it was pretty horrible, because people on both sides sort of knew what was going on. It was really uncomfortable. It would have been much easier, much kinder, to actually let them go and tell them and talk them through it. And then maybe there would have been room for those other aspects of helping them get to somewhere better, and smooth everybody through that difficult process. But I think it can take a bit of bravery sometimes.

But I've seen it from the other side, where it has been your classic quiet firing, just hoping that the person would go away. And I think it has often come down to a lack of bravery, and just a lack of understanding about what empathy can do to make it so much easier.

I'm going to give the final word today to Frances Frei from Harvard Business School, because I thought it might be helpful to end with a vision of the opposite of quiet firing, so that we know what to aim for. And, Rachel, Frances told you that we may well be able to find this in a store not too far from our front door.

Frances Frei 47:11

If you go into a Walmart store anywhere in the world, I think you can talk to the frontline employees, and they will understand the strategy. That is, they'll understand that our job is to set consumers up for success.

Our definition of that is to let them spend the least amount of money as possible so that they can live a better life. Everyone will get that, which means every time there's a new hire, lots of people in the organization are communicating the strategy to those people.

Not just the strategy deck that was communicated at the top, but it's like we're all onboarding one another about strategy and about our understanding of strategy. Because it's not only such a consistent

strategy, it's well understood up and down the organization. So I think that we all have a chance to communicate the strategy to one another if it has been communicated effectively to **us**.

Jonathan Hancock 48:08

I wonder how many other organizations could feel as confident as that – that everybody knows what the vision is? And everybody's helping each other, and connecting with each other, and helping the manager not to accidentally quiet fire somebody in the background.

So it all binds together, doesn't it? And there's a really nice set of links there, I think, with all the things we heard about quiet quitting – that if we can get everybody engaged, on board, connected with... we're heading off so many problems on both sides – that quiet-quitting **and** the quiet-firing side.

So there you have it. It's a complicated subject, isn't it? But we've given you perspectives on quiet firing from quite a few of our expert interviewees, all of whom can be heard in full if you join Mind Tools.

So today, Robert Bruce Shaw told us about avoiding managerial blind spots. Natalie Holder-Winfield explained how to engage with everyone on the team, so you don't have any outsiders that you might be overlooking or being unfair to.

Mark Brouker focused on the barriers people might face at work – and the manager's responsibility to know about them and do something about them. Kate Sweetman highlighted the importance of having a clear business strategy, so that you know what talent you need, and **they** know what they have to do to succeed.

And we also heard from Yael Zofi on staying connected in virtual teams; Mimi Nicklin, on how to let people go when you have to, but doing it right, with empathy; and Frances Frei on achieving that wonderful workplace where everyone's in it together, and there's connection and engagement and understanding. Wouldn't it be lovely? Wouldn't the world be great if we all lived in Walmart?!

Rachel Salaman 49:51

[Laughs] And we'd also love to hear what listeners think about quiet firing and quiet quitting. Which bits of advice chimed with you? Do you have any insights or ideas of your own? And if you've experienced any of the things we've talked about today, what happened? What did you do? And what did you learn as a result? Let us know by emailing expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com, or by finding Jonathan or me on LinkedIn.

Jonathan Hancock 50:20

And we've just got time for a couple of bits of feedback on our last episode – about dealing with difficult people. First a spot of knowledge sharing from Helen Atkinson, in Surrey in England. And she said that one of her favorite Mind Tools resources is about something called “the duper's delight,” where people seem to get a kick out of being dishonest or disruptive at work. And she says, “You didn't mention dishonest people specifically. But I think there are links with behaviors like passive aggression, and one or two of the other difficult character types.” And she says, “I've re-read your article and re-watched your animation.” Excellent! “Because I've come across several dupers in my time.” And Helen says, “I'd

recommend these resources to anyone who thinks that someone they know is being down-and-out deceitful, and they want to understand why, and what to do about it.”

Maybe – as I’m sure we will extend that list at some point – we could add the duper to that list of difficult people. But yeah, some good sharing of resources. And there’s some excellent stuff on Mind Tools about dodging the “duper’s delight.”

Rachel Salaman 51:22

Very good point from Helen there. And Craig also got in touch. He’s a recruiter in Washington, D.C. And he said, “I listened to the episode on difficult people with interest. A theme that jumped out at me was curiosity. I love the idea of being curious when other people are being difficult. I think it can save you from gut reaction, anger and stress. It can also make people think more about their behavior, if you say, “I’m curious: why are you saying that or doing that?” Such a good point.

Jonathan Hancock 51:53

It’s such a good tip. But it’s funny because we’ve obviously talked about it a bit today as well, haven’t we? Mark Brouker earlier was talking about being curious. Definitely get to know people at work. But I definitely agree with Craig there that you can gain a lot for yourself. Takes the stress out, if you say. “OK, I’m curious about that.” And it can push it back to the person as well. and really flag up their behavior, if you say, “Look, I’m curious why you’d say that,” “why you’d be like that.” Very good advice. Thank you, Craig.

If you haven’t heard that episode, well, why not go back and have a listen. It’s there wherever you found this podcast, along with all our other episodes – on topics like asking for more pay, and getting the right things done in your working day. And like Rachel said there, keep sending us your thoughts on what you hear. Expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com.

Rachel Salaman 52:40

We hope we’ve inspired you to check out everything on offer from Mind Tools – not just the full-length Expert Interviews, but also our Book Insights, articles, workbooks, videos, quizzes, infographics, and everything else we’ve got to improve your professional and personal life.

Jonathan Hancock 52:56

Yes. And find out just how easy it is to join us at mindtools.com. And Rachel and I will be back soon with another Expert Voices podcast – assuming we haven’t either quietly quit or been quietly fired in the meantime!

Rachel Salaman 53:10

[Laughs] Hopefully see you then.

Jonathan Hancock 36:13

[Laughs] See you soon!