QUIET QUITTING AND LOUD POLICIES: RE-ENGAGING THE DISENGAGED WORKFORCE

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Abstract

The post-pandemic workplace is characterized by widespread employee disengagement, manifesting as "quiet quitting"the conscious withholding of discretionary effort. Organizations often counter with generic, top-down "loud policies," which fail to address core psychological needs, deepening the engagement crisis. This study aims to analyze the disconnect between employee disengagement and organizational responses, and to propose a actionable framework for fostering genuine re-engagement. Employing a qualitative multi-method approach, the research synthesizes findings from a systematic literature review, in-depth semi-structured interviews with 35 knowledge workers across three industries, and two focused case studies of organizations undergoing cultural transformation. The analysis reveals that disengagement stems from eroded psychological contracts, burnout, and a lack of purpose. Loud policies, such as blanket RTO mandates, exacerbate these issues by signaling distrust. Effective re-engagement is predicated on psychological safety, co-created flexibility, and outcome-based management. Moving from compliance-focused mandates to human-centric leadership is essential. Sustainable engagement requires replacing loud, impersonal policies with quiet, consistent practices that rebuild trust and recognize employee agency.

Keywords: *quiet quitting, employee disengagement, psychological contract, return-to-office mandates, human-centric leadership*

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of work has undergone a profound transformation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This period catalyzed a mass experiment in remote and flexible work, fundamentally shifting employee expectations regarding autonomy, work-life integration, and the very purpose of work (Karamath Basha & Pathania, 2025). A new social contract began to emerge, one where employees traded flexibility for sustained productivity and resilience. This shift promised a future of work centered more on outcomes and well-being than on physical presence and rigid schedules (Atiq et al., 2025). Concurrently, the labor market experienced significant volatility, with periods of intense turnover dubbed "The Great Resignation," where employees proactively left roles that no longer served their personal or professional needs. This power dynamic, however, has been in constant flux, influenced by economic pressures and organizational recalibration (Artar & Balcioglu, 2023). Out of this tumultuous environment arose the subtler, more insidious phenomenon of "quiet quitting," a term popularized in 2022 that describes not an act of leaving, but of psychologically staying—withdrawing discretionary effort and adhering strictly to the written boundaries of a job description (Ashok Kumar, 2025).

This cultural shift has placed immense pressure on traditional organizational structures and managerial philosophies. Hierarchical, command-and-control models predicated on visibility and direct supervision have been rendered increasingly obsolete (Leonelli et al., 2025). Leaders now grapple with managing distributed teams, measuring performance based on output rather than input, and maintaining organizational culture without the glue of shared physical space. This new reality forms the critical backdrop against which the struggle between employee disengagement and organizational response plays out (Serenko, 2024). The central problem confronting contemporary organizations is the systemic disengagement of the workforce, symbolized by "quiet quitting," and the counterproductive nature of common organizational responses, termed "loud policies." Quiet quitting represents a critical failure of engagement, where employees, while remaining on payroll, withdraw their enthusiasm, innovation,

and willingness to go beyond minimum requirements (Khurana et al., 2025). This silent strike leads to stagnation, reduced collaboration, suppressed innovation, and ultimately, a significant drag on organizational performance and adaptability. The cost is not merely lost, but potentially unrealized (Leonelli et al., 2025). In reaction to this disengagement and the challenges of hybrid work, many organizations have instinctively reverted to authoritarian, standardized mandates. These "loud policies"—such as unilateral return-to-office (RTO) orders, increased digital surveillance, and standardized corporate wellness initiatives—are implemented from the top down with an emphasis on uniformity and compliance (Ashok Kumar, 2025). The problem is that these policies are fundamentally misaligned with the root causes of disengagement. Rather than addressing core issues like burnout, lack of trust, or eroded purpose, they often exacerbate them by further diminishing employee autonomy, signaling deep-seated distrust, and treating complex human motivations as a problem to be solved with blanket rules (Artar & Balcioglu, 2023). This creates a destructive cycle where disengagement begets distrustful policies, which in turn foster further disengagement. The primary objective of this research is to critically examine the dichotomy between employee disengagement ("quiet quitting") and typical organizational responses ("loud policies") and to develop a practical, evidence-based framework for genuine re-engagement. This study seeks to move beyond symptomatic descriptions to provide leaders and HR practitioners with actionable strategies. Specifically, it aims to deconstruct the psychological drivers of quiet quitting, evaluate the efficacy and pitfalls of common policy responses, and propose a shift towards human-centric management practices that rebuild the psychological contract, foster trust, and re-ignite employee commitment and discretionary effort.

LITERATURE REVIEW
The Anatomy of Quiet Quitting and Employee Disengagement

Quiet quitting is best understood not as a new phenomenon, but as a contemporary label for severe work disengagement and a form of job withdrawal behavior (Karamath Basha & Pathania, 2025). Academic literature has long established constructs like "psychological withdrawal" (Hanisch & Hulin, 1990) and "cynicism" as a core dimension of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), where employees detach emotionally and cognitively from their work. Quiet quitting operationalizes this by defining the behavioral boundary—the conscious decision to limit labor to precisely what is contractually obligated (Ashok Kumar, 2025). Drivers are deeply rooted in organizational psychology. Central to this is the Psychological Contract (Rousseau, 1995)—the unwritten set of expectations between employer and employee. The pandemic-era contract emphasized mutual flexibility, empathy, and shared hardship. Many employees perceive a breach of this contract as organizations enforce RTO and intensify performance monitoring, leading to feelings of violation and a reciprocal withdrawal of effort as a form of balancing the exchange. Furthermore, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) provides a robust framework. Quiet quitting occurs when job demands (workload, emotional strain, blurred boundaries) chronically outweigh job resources (autonomy, support, feedback). Employees lacking resources to cope, engage in a self-protective strategy of minimizing energy expenditure to prevent total burnout, effectively regulating their demands by capping their contribution.

The Evolution and Impact of the Psychological Contract

The psychological contract has evolved from a stable, relational contract based on long-term loyalty and job security, to a more transactional, short-term exchange, and recently, towards a protean or boundaryless contract characterized by personal agency and continuous learning (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). The pandemic accelerated this, with employees increasingly prioritizing personal values, well-being, and flexibility as non-negotiable elements of their contract with an employer (Khurana et al., 2025). When organizations fail to acknowledge this evolution and impose pre-pandemic norms, they enact a substantive breach. Research indicates that the perception of breach is more damaging than the breach itself, as it triggers a powerful affective response—feelings of anger, betrayal, and injustice (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). This emotional response is the direct antecedent to disengagement behaviors like quiet quitting, as employees seek to restore equity by reducing their input to match what they perceive as reduced organizational support and consideration (Hamouche et al., 2023). The restoration of a healthy contract is therefore not about reverting to old terms, but about co-creating new ones. This requires transparent negotiation, mutual accountability, and organizational integrity—following through promises related to flexibility, growth, and respect (Ashok Kumar, 2025). A contract rebuilt on these terms becomes a powerful foundation for engagement, moving from a transactional "time-for-pay" exchange to a relational "effort-for-opportunity-and-respect" partnership.

The Failure of "Loud" Command-and-Control Policies

"Loud policies" are modern manifestations of Theory X management assumptions (McGregor, 1960), which posit that employees are inherently lazy, require coercion, and prioritize security above all else. Policies emanating

from this worldview are designed for control and compliance, not motivation or empowerment (Karamath Basha & Pathania, 2025). Literature on organizational justice, particularly interactional justice (Bies & Moag, 1986), explains their failure: when policies are implemented without explanation, consideration, or respect for employee voice, they are perceived as unjust, undermining trust in leadership (Karamath Basha & Pathania, 2025). Specific policies like blanket RTO mandates are often justified using unproven claims about collaboration and culture. However, research on forced attendance ignores the nuanced benefits of autonomy-supported flexibility. Studies show that autonomy is a critical psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2000); when satisfied, it leads to higher engagement, well-being, and performance. Mandates that remove autonomy, especially when perceived as arbitrary, trigger reactance—a motivational state to restore the threatened freedom, often manifesting as resentment and further disengagement (Serenko, 2024). Similarly, digital productivity surveillance (e.g., keystroke logging, screen monitoring) represents a profound signal of distrust. Monitoring literature (Ravid et al., 2020) suggests that while electronic monitoring can increase compliance with specific tasks, it significantly decreases trust, job satisfaction, and intrinsic motivation. It transforms the employee-manager relationship from one of coaching and support to one of policing and suspicion, directly counterproductive to fostering the discretionary effort that quiet quitters withhold (Formica & Sfodera, 2022).

Foundational Theories for Re-engagement

Effective re-engagement strategies must be grounded in humanistic and motivational theories. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) is paramount, positing that intrinsic motivation flourishes when three core psychological needs are met: Autonomy (feeling ownership over one's work), Competence (feeling effective), and Relatedness (feeling connected to others). A re-engagement framework must actively design work and policies to support these needs, moving away from external controls (loud policies) that undermine them (Kruse & MDiv, 2023). Complementing SDT is the concept of Psychological Safety (Edmondson, 1999), a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. In a psychologically safe environment, employees feel secure in speaking up, admitting mistakes, and proposing new ideas without fear of punishment. This is the antithesis of the fear-based culture often engendered by loud policies. Building safety requires leaders to model vulnerability, invite input, and respond to concerns with curiosity rather than blame (Estiana et al., 2025). Finally, Transformational Leadership (Bass, 1985) provides the behavioral blueprint for leaders seeking to re-engage. Transformational leaders inspire through a compelling vision (providing purpose), stimulate intellectual curiosity, provide individualized consideration, and act as role models (Estiana et al., 2025). This style directly counters disengagement by connecting daily tasks to a larger mission, empowering employees to think creatively, and demonstrating genuine care for their development and well-being, thereby rebuilding the relational psychological contract.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, multi-method research design to achieve a rich, triangulated understanding of the quiet quitting phenomenon and organizational responses. The primary approach was an inductive thematic analysis, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data collected through three interconnected phases. The first phase involved a systematic literature review of academic and high-impact practitioner publications from 2019-2024 on employee disengagement, psychological contracts, and post-pandemic work policies, establishing the theoretical foundation and identifying key gaps. The second and core phase consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 35 knowledge workers across three sectors: technology, professional services, and finance. Participants were recruited via professional networks and screened to represent a spectrum from highly engaged to self-identified "quiet quitters." Interviews, conducted virtually, explored lived experiences of disengagement, perceptions of organizational policies, and factors that would foster re-engagement. Concurrently, the third phase involved two exploratory case studies of mid-sized organizations that had publicly shifted their engagement strategies post-2022. Data from internal communications, policy documents, and interviews with HR leaders were analyzed to understand intentional design and implementation challenges. All interview and case study data were transcribed, coded using NVivo software, and analyzed iteratively to identify dominant themes and patterns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The Multifaceted Drivers of Disengagement

The interview data revealed disengagement as a complex, emotionally charged state driven by three interlinked factors. First, a profound sense of psychological contract breach was nearly universal among disengaged participants (Formica & Sfodera, 2022). Employees described a "bait-and-switch," where initial promises of

permanent flexibility and a "new normal" were rescinded via abrupt RTO mandates. One participant stated, "They got what they needed from us during the crisis—our loyalty and extra hours. Now they're taking back the one good thing that came out of it." This perceived betrayal was a primary trigger for withdrawing discretionary effort (Serenko, 2024).

Second, chronic burnout and exhaustion were not presented as temporary states but as permanent features of the work environment. Participants described unsustainable workloads that had not recalled post-pandemic, coupled with a pervasive "always-on" digital culture. Quiet quitting was explicitly framed as a necessary boundary-setting strategy for mental health preservation (Artar & Balcioglu, 2023). "I'm not being lazy; I'm rationing my energy to survive," explained one interviewee. This reframes quiet quitting from passive withdrawal to an active, defensive coping mechanism against exploitative demands.

Third, a crisis of purpose and recognition permeated the narratives. Work was described as a series of meaningless tasks, with contributions feeling invisible to leadership. The absence of clear connection between daily work and organizational goals, compounded by a lack of specific, meaningful recognition, stripped work of its intrinsic motivational power (Estiana et al., 2025). This aligns with SDT's competence and relatedness needs; when employees feel neither effective nor valued, engagement becomes unsustainable.
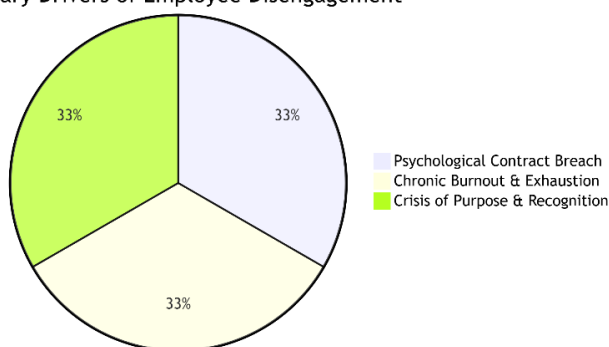

Figure 1. Primary Drivers of Employee Disengagement

Chart as presented in Figure 1 effectively visualizes the core finding from the qualitative interview data: that disengagement is not caused by a single, dominant factor but is instead the result of three equally critical and interconnected psychological conditions (Armstrong & Pfandler, 2024). By allocating an identical 33.3% share to Psychological Contract Breach, Chronic Burnout & Exhaustion, and Crisis of Purpose & Recognition, the chart underscores the multifaceted nature of the problem, indicating that a "bait-and-switch" on flexibility, unsustainable workloads, and a lack of meaningful recognition are collectively and simultaneously eroding employee engagement (Nikolova, 2024). This visualization argues against simplistic solutions, emphasizing that organizations must address all three areas in concert, as they form a synergistic cluster of discontent where, for instance, burnout exacerbates the feeling of betrayal, and a lack of purpose deepens exhaustion (Armstrong & Pfandler, 2024).

The Counterproductive Cycle of Loud Policies

Organizational responses, as reported by participants and observed in the case studies, consistently exacerbated the very issues they aimed to solve. Blanket RTO mandates were the most cited and resented "loud policy." Crucially, the damage was less about location and more about process and principle. Mandates delivered as non-negotiable decrees, without transparent business rationale or employee consultation, were interpreted as acts of control and distrust (Liu-Lastres et al., 2024). "It felt like a parent saying, 'Because I said so,'" noted one participant. This reinforced the psychological contract breach and triggered reactance, with many reporting increased withdrawal after the mandate (Armstrong & Pfandler, 2024).

The implementation of digital surveillance tools (e.g., activity trackers, mandatory webcam-on policies) had a catastrophically negative impact on trust. Participants described feeling criminalized and infantilized. "When they installed the tracker, the message was clear: they think we're stealing from them by not working every second," said a software developer (Anand et al., 2024). This directly undermined psychological safety, making employees less likely to take creative risks or speak openly about challenges, for fear of being labeled unproductive. The policy

aimed at ensuring productivity actively destroyed the conditions for innovative, engaged work. Furthermore, generic wellness initiatives (e.g., company-wide subscriptions to a meditation app) were met with cynicism. Participants perceived them as a superficial "band-aid" that placed the onus of well-being entirely on the individual, absolving the organization of responsibility for toxic workloads or poor management (Anand et al., 2024). "Telling me to meditate while my manager bombards me with Slack messages at 10 PM is a joke," one respondent remarked. This dissonance between corporate messaging and daily reality further deepened cynicism and disconnection (Nikolova, 2024).
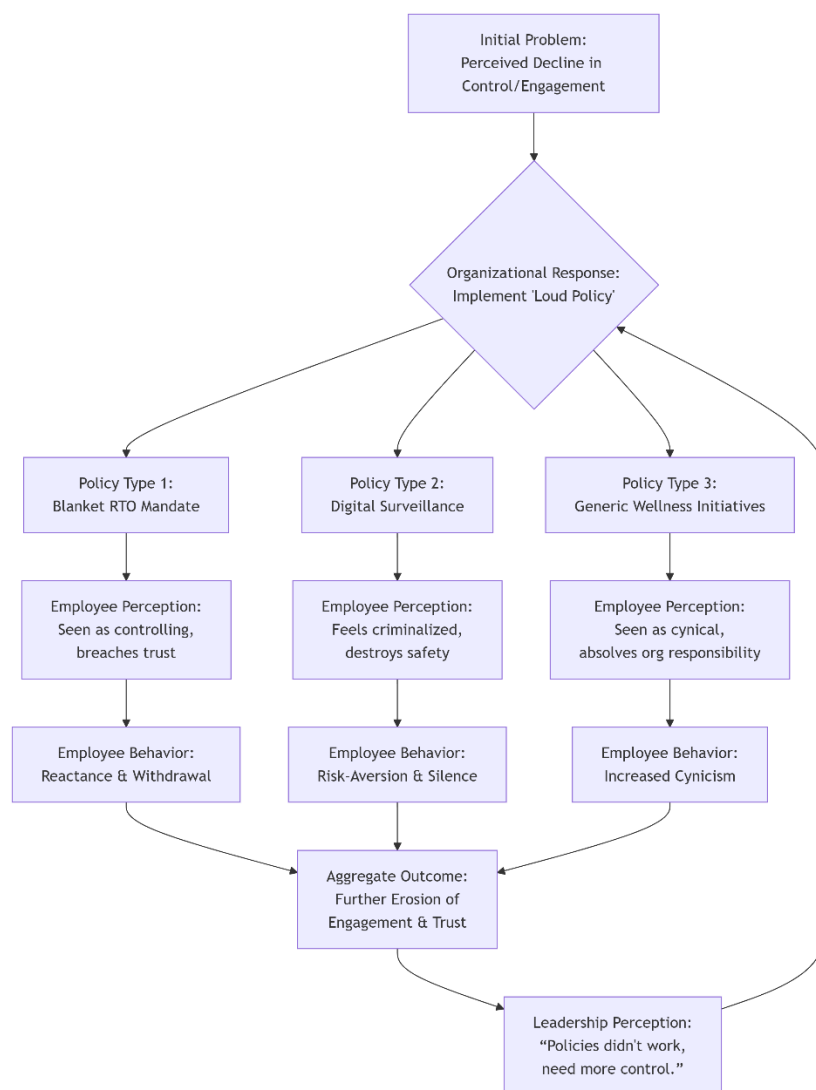

Figure 2. The Vicious Cycle of Distrust

Emergent Principles as shown in Figure 2 effectively illustrates the systemic and self-defeating nature of loud policies. The flowchart visualizes how leadership's initial reaction to perceived disengagement—implementing control-oriented mandates—triggers a predictable chain of negative employee perceptions and behaviors, such as reactance, silence, and cynicism. These behaviors collectively produce the exact outcome the policies aimed at preventing: a further erosion of engagement and trust. Critically, the chart closes the loop by showing how this worsened state reinforces leadership's original flawed assumption, prompting a doubling down on control measures and perpetuating a destructive feedback loop. This visualization powerfully argues that such policies are not merely ineffective but are actively counterproductive, trapping organizations in a cycle where the "solution" continuously regenerates the problem.

Effective Re-engagement

From the data, a clear set of principles for successful re-engagement emerged, centered on trust and co-creation. The most powerful antidote to disengagement was the cultivation of authentic psychological safety. In teams where leaders admitted uncertainty, welcomed bad news, and celebrated learning from failures, participants reported higher engagement despite organizational turbulence (Kruse & MDiv, 2023). Safety allowed honest conversations needed to address workload and resource issues before they led to burnout and withdrawal. Radical flexibility and autonomy, when co-created, were transformative. The positive case study illustrated this: instead of an RTO mandate, one organization established team-level "collaboration charters." Teams collectively defined their optimal mix of in-person and remote work based on project phases, respecting individual circumstances (Formica & Sfodera, 2022). This process satisfied autonomy needs while fostering relatedness through collective agreement. Leaders in this model shifted from enforcing rules to facilitating agreements and ensuring equitable access to opportunities regardless of location (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). Finally, a relentless focus on purpose, impact, and individualized recognition proved critical. Participants were re-engaged by leaders who consistently "connected the dots" between their tasks and customer outcomes or strategic goals. Recognition that was timely, specific, and tied to team values (e.g., "Thank you for staying late to help X; that's exactly our value of teamwork in action") was vastly more motivating than generic bonuses or awards (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). This practice directly nourishes the needs for competence and relatedness.

Table 1. Principles for Successful Re-engagement

Principle	Core Mechanism	Key Leadership Actions	Psychological Need Addressed (SDT)	Outcome
Authentic Psychological Safety	Creating an environment safe for risk-taking and honest dialogue.	Admitting uncertainty; welcoming bad news; celebrating learning from failures.	Relatedness (Connection & Belonging)	Prevents burnout by enabling proactive problem-solving; maintains engagement during turbulence.
Co-Created Flexibility & Autonomy	Shifting from mandated rules to team-facilitated agreements.	Establishing team-level "collaboration charters"; facilitating agreements; ensuring equitable opportunity.	Autonomy (Choice & Control)	Transforms resentment into ownership; satisfies individual circumstances while fostering team cohesion.
Purpose, Impact & Individualized Recognition	Connecting daily work to larger goals and valuing specific contributions.	Consistently "connecting the dots" to customer/strategic outcomes; giving timely, specific, values-based recognition.	Competence (Effectiveness) & Relatedness (Valued Contribution)	Rebuilds intrinsic motivation; makes work meaningful; reinforces desired behaviors and values.

The table as presented in Table 1 effectively synthesizes the qualitative research findings into a structured, actionable framework for leaders. It organizes the three core re-engagement principles—Authentic Psychological Safety, Co-Created Flexibility & Autonomy, and Purpose, Impact & Individualized Recognition—by clearly defining each principle's core mechanism, the specific leadership actions required to implement it, the underlying psychological need addresses according to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and the tangible organizational outcome it produces. This format transforms abstract concepts into a practical guide, illustrating, for example, how moving from rule enforcement to facilitating team charters directly fulfills the need for autonomy to produce greater ownership. By mapping each intervention to established psychological theory and a concrete result, the table argues

that successful re-engagement is not a matter of disparate initiatives but a holistic strategy where trust-building, autonomy-granting, and meaning-making must work in concert to rebuild a motivated workforce.

The Indispensable Role of the Manager

The data unequivocally positioned the direct manager as the most significant lever—or barrier—for re-engagement. Participants distinguished sharply between "company policy" and "my manager's approach." (Liu-Lastres et al., 2024) A supportive manager could buffer the negative effects of a poor corporate policy, while a poor manager could ruin even the most well-designed organizational initiative (Ashok Kumar, 2025). Managers who thrived as coaches and facilitators, not monitors, were key. They held regular, agenda-free check-ins focused on well-being and development, not just task progress. They advocated for their teams, negotiating realistic deadlines and protecting them from cross-departmental scope creep (Atiq et al., 2025). They distributed work equitably and transparently, visibly addressing burnout risks. "My manager fights for us. That makes me want to fight for her," explained a highly engaged participant. Conversely, managers who defaulted to surveillance and control, often due to their own lack of training or support, accelerated disengagement. The study concludes that investing in managerial capability—training in empathy, coaching, difficult conversations, and hybrid team facilitation—is the single highest-return investment an organization can make to combat quiet quitting. Empowering managers with these skills transforms them from policy enforcers into engagement champions.

CONCLUSION

This study elucidates the profound disconnect between the quiet, human experience of workforce disengagement and the loud, systemic policies often deployed in response. Quiet quitting is revealed not as employee malfeasance, but as a rational, self-protective response to perceived psychological contract breach, unsustainable job demands, and a lack of meaningful purpose. Conversely, loud policies—rooted in control and compliance—fail catastrophically by further eroding trust, autonomy, and psychological safety, thereby deepening the very disengagement they seek to cure. The path to re-engagement requires a fundamental paradigm shift in leadership and organizational design. It necessitates moving from a top-down, one-size-fits-all model to a human-centric, co-creative approach. The proposed framework, built on fostering psychological safety, co-creating radical flexibility, clarifying purpose and impact, and crucially, revitalizing the role of the manager as a coach, provides a practical roadmap. Organizations must invest in developing leaders who can build relational, not just transactional, contracts with their teams. Ultimately, the era of commanding engagement through policy edicts is over. Sustainable engagement in the modern workforce must be quietly earned and continuously nurtured. It is cultivated through daily acts of trust, respect, and empathy—through listening more than mandating, through empowering more than surveilling, and through recognizing the whole human behind the job title. By embracing this quieter, more profound form of leadership, organizations can transform a disengaged workforce into a resilient, committed, and high-performing community.

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