

Quiet Quitting and Reasoned Action

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Abstract

The Quiet Quitting phenomenon has exploded in its importance in organizations of all types as workers have resisted the changes in the employer-employee relationship of the past two decades. The purpose of this paper is to identify the importance of the Theory of Reasoned Action and beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors that impact Quiet Quitting. Citing from scholarly literature, we explain the four key elements of the Theory of Reasoned Action and how they impact Quiet Quitting.

Keywords: quiet quitting, theory of reasoned action, understanding employee needs, employee engagement, trust

1. Introduction

The decline in employer commitment to the wellbeing and long-term interest of employees has resulted in decreased employee engagement, reduced trust, and the reluctance of employees to take on tasks beyond their job descriptions or to demonstrate the extra-mile effort that characterizes the best employees (Clifton & Harter, 2019). “Quiet Quitting” has been featured in major business publications from the *Wall Street Journal* (Smith, 2022) to *Forbes* (Kruse, 2022) with sources reporting that fully half of today’s workers have indicated that they are unwilling to take on extra responsibilities. Coupled with the “Great Resignation” in which more than 90 million employees left their employers in 2021 and 2022 (Iagurci, 2023), a large percentage of U. S. employees are communicating to employers that today’s work culture is no longer meeting employees’ needs or expectations. Labeled “the biggest leadership issue of our time,” the breakdown in the culture at many American businesses has reached catastrophic proportions according to Gallup researchers, Jim Clifton and Jim Harter (2023).

The purpose of this paper is to provide insights into Quiet Quitting as a practical issue in human behavior, drawing upon the Theory of Reasoned Action as a basis for understanding the underlying rationale behind the responses of so many members of today’s employee group. We begin the paper by explaining Quiet Quitting from the perspectives of organizational leadership experts who have documented this growing phenomenon. Following that introduction, we explain the Theory of Reasoned Action as a framework for explaining the rationale for so many employees adopting a Quiet Quitting response. Drawing upon insights from management and leadership scholars, we offer insights about Quiet Quitting which practitioners and academicians can incorporate in response to the behavior of the modern employee. We conclude the paper by identifying four contributions that this paper makes to the management literature and offer suggestions for additional research.

2. Quiet Quitting and Its Causes

Quiet Quitting is defined as the unwillingness of employees to do more than that which their job descriptions require and reflects a resentment about the workplace that typically results from an organization's inability to create a meaningful relationship with its employees (Zenger & Folkman, 2022). Quiet Quitting employees limit their effort at work typically out of a desire to maintain personal work/life balance or to maintain health and well-being in what has become a high-pressure work environment (Hare, 2022). The Quiet Quitting response reflects the attempt of a growing percentage of employees to communicate to employers that the workplace is no longer considered to be healthy for employees (Ellis & Yang, 2022). The root cause of this decline in employee commitment lies with the failure of managers and supervisors to engage, empower, and inspire employees with whom they work (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023).

The Gallup research team studied the attitudes of employees in 160 different countries and observed that only 15 percent of employees worldwide described themselves as highly engaged at work (Jouany & Makipaa, 2023). Gallup also found that 70 percent of the variance in an organization's performance was due to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of managers and supervisors (Suellentrop & Bauman, 2021). Based upon their extensive research, Gallup concluded that employees want full-time employment that provides a livable income; the opportunity to learn and grow; the respect from their organizations that treat them as valued individuals rather than as commodities; and work which accomplishes a meaningful purpose worthy of their best efforts (Clifton & Harter, 2019).

Unfortunately, the growing body of evidence about the workplace suggests that employers are increasingly turning to contingent employees – with an ever-increasing percentage of employers hiring part-time and temporary workers who are not offered full-time benefits (Mudrick, 2023). For example, the study conducted by Harvard University's Lawrence F. Katz and Princeton University's Alan Krueger (2019) found that 94% of the new jobs created in the U.S. from 1995 to 2015 were part-time, temporary, or contract – with updated research confirming that this trend has continued (Statista Research Department, 2023).

3. The Reasoned Action Framework

Individual decision-making is a process that involves a complex calculus which takes place at both the conscious and unconscious levels (Vrabel & Zeigler-Hill, 2020). Each person's personal standards for behavioral choice reflect an identity standard which incorporates their individual values and how those values equate with their intended behaviors (Burke & Stets, 2022). The Theory of Reasoned Action, shown below in Figure 1, provides insights into how each person makes decisions and translates those decisions into their actions – including how they they interact and what they expect as employees within the context of a job (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015).

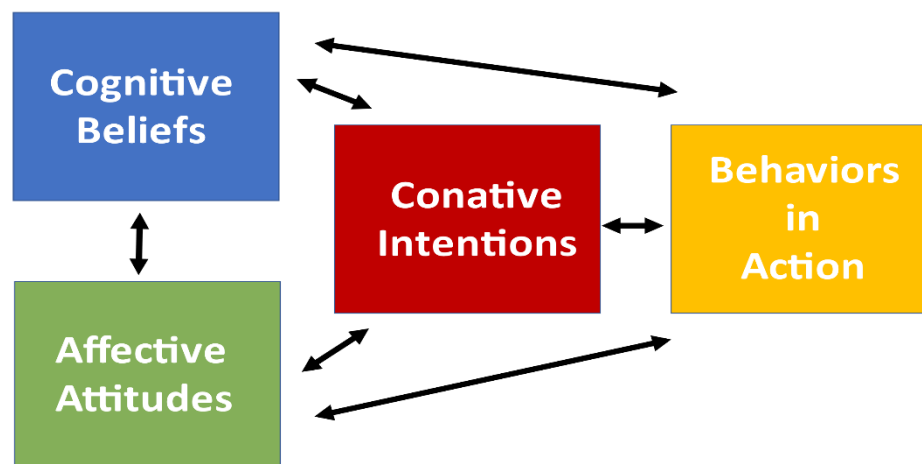


Figure 1. Theory of Reasoned Action

3.1 Cognitive Beliefs

Beliefs are the cognitive assumptions that each person makes about the world to make sense of her or his experiences (Weick, 1995). As Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) have noted, these beliefs are fundamentally important in the process of interpreting and predicting the world. Belief strength is the degree of commitment that a person has to a specific set of ideas or values, including the enduring nature of that commitment over time (Clifton, 2007). Belief confidence is the degree to which a person has that her or his assumptions about the world are true (Lewis, 2018). Nobel laureate, Daniel Kahneman (2011) has observed that our confidence in what we believe may nonetheless be fallacious, unfounded, and even preposterous – but Kahneman also acknowledged that such confidence is essential because it is fundamental to that sense-making requirement that we all have to find order in the world.

Each individual's beliefs are the function of a broad range of personal experiences which influence that person's identity, how they view others, and how they see the world (Burke & Stets, 2022). Education Psychologist, Kendra Cherry (2023), has identified the ways in which each person's beliefs determine how they view the world. Each of the following ways explains how beliefs affect how people think and what they consider to be important.

- **Attention**—Attention is the screening process which is given to that which we perceive and determines a person's ability to process information while tuning out what are perceived to be less relevant details (Posner, 2011).
- **Choice-based Behavior**—The capacity to make a personal choice among available options is a function of one's ability to identify alternative possibilities and to believe that one has the right to make those choices (Curtis, 2023).
- **Decision-making** – Each person makes thousands of conscious, subconscious, and unconscious decisions every day (Steele & Stefansson, 2020). Those decisions are a function of the explicit and implicit goals which directly related to their personal identity (Burke & Stets, 2022).
- **Forgetting** – The process of forgetting is a function of the degree to which information about an experience, idea, or feeling is unimportant in the brain short-term or long-term (Cantor, 2021). That which is forgotten can be remembered and recalled, but the tendency is to forget that which has initially been deemed unimportant (McLeod, 2023).
- **Information processing** – For every individual, the brain constantly gathers, stores, records, analyzes, and retrieves information (Schank, 2014). The process of evaluating information occurs continuously and determines one's motivations (Hann, Hui, Lee, & Png, 2007).
- **Language acquisition**—Language acquisition is the ongoing process by which every individual learns, speaks, writes, and expresses themselves and refines their ability to understand information and communicate with others – including the ability to develop that skill in multiple languages (Zaščerinska, 2010).
- **Memory** – Memory is the process of learning, processing, and recalling information about an idea, concept or experience (Cherry, 2022). What is remembered is consciously or unconsciously deemed noteworthy – even when that information is painful or insignificant in its relative importance (Klein, 2015).
- **Problem-solving** – The multi-stage goal-oriented process of problem solving involves defining a problem, identifying possible alternative solutions, selecting what seems to be the most effective option, and then attempting to implement that solution to achieve a desired outcome (Wilbur, 2023).
- **Speech perception** – As individuals process what others are saying they strive to accurately hear, interpret, and understand what others are communicating (Poeppel & Monahan, 2015). That ability includes the capacity to interpret sarcasm and irony in evaluating what is said and the context in which communication occurs (Heald & Nusbaum, 2014).
- **Visual perception**—Interpreting, giving meaning to, and correctly understanding the physical world are acquired visual perception skills and include the ability to correctly interpret written writing as well as interpersonal interactions and other physical events (Miller, 2011).

Each of these nine cognitive qualities reflects the abilities of rational thinking and analysis in observing, interpreting, and evaluating information (Turner, 2022). According to the Theory of Reasoned Action, beliefs enable individuals to equate actions with expected outcomes (Ajzen, 2012). Beliefs that equate with normative standards about expected conduct tend to reinforce intended behaviors and, conversely, beliefs that conflict with those standards tend to discourage intention (Gibbons, 2013).

3.2 Affective Attitudes

Affective attitudes refer to the emotional reactions that individuals have as they respond to some object or individual. Attitudes reflect individuals' subjective preferences, biases, likes and dislikes, and feelings that interact constantly with cognitive beliefs in influencing intentions and behaviors (Drew, 2023). These affective attitudes are the result of personal experiences – especially significant emotional events that have affected a person's life in a positive or negative way (Park, 2000). Although some scholars may suggest that emotions and attitudes have a minimal long-term impact on decision-making and personal choices, other scholars fundamentally disagree (Andrade & Ariely, 2009). The University of Michigan's Karl Weick (2020, p. 1420) has explained that the interplay between each person's subjective affective experiences and cognitive understanding generate a complex process including both cognitive and affective factors that “include self-validating prophecy, partiality toward similarity, ambivalence between belief and doubt, and understanding as ongoing accomplishment.”

The integrated interaction between cognition and affect is well understood in psychology literature and has been written about extensively (de Houwer & Hermans, 2010; Robinson, Watkins & Harmon-Jones, 2013). Weick (2000) suggested that the decision-making process is frequently made at the emotional or gut level but then justified at the rational or

cognitive level. Addressing how decisions are often made, Weick and Sutcliffe (2015, p. xi) described sensemaking as a “developing set of ideas with explanatory possibilities, rather than as a body of knowledge.” Despite the reality that many alleged “facts” are no more than personal opinions subject to broad interpretation and frequent misrepresentation, those who make many emotion-based decisions may often do so with great insistence that their unique interpretation of questionable data is the only truth possible. Although the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines scientific truth as both “objective” and “confirmed by proof,” each person’s subjective framework is a by-product of personal experience in affirming what is believed to be true (Mulligan & Correia, 2021).

M. Scott Peck (2003) has written extensively about “truer answers” in the human experience and emphasizes the importance of different levels of understanding about the truth as a person grows and increases knowledge. Notwithstanding that the ability to discern truth may increase as individuals expand their understanding, their subjective perception of their commitment to that truth may be stronger at earlier stages of understanding than at full maturity (Belkoniene & Vollett). The limited ability to have all of the information required to make a decision, as well as the wisdom to be able to distinguish between seemingly inconsistent evidence, can impact attitudes about the best course of action and may make it possible to overrate wishful thinking about desired outcomes in determining the best path to pursue – particularly when social pressures or other outside factors are also in play (Capuano et al., 2017).

Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) explained that attitudes encompass one’s positive or negative thoughts about behavior and actions, largely influenced by the consequences associated with performing a behavior. A major consideration in affecting attitudes is whether those consequences are socially acceptable and will make them feel either good or bad (Albarracin, Johnson, & Zanna, 2005). Social norms and expectations clearly play a significant role as individuals assess the impact of their actions and behaviors on how they feel and how others respond to them (Albarracin, 2021). Attitude toward performing a specific behavior is the most significant predictor of an individual’s intention to act (Jaccard, 2012).

3.3 Conative Intentions

Intentions are aims, purposes, or desires to complete a course of action so that a person can achieve an intended goal, honor a desired value, or fulfill a meaningful result (Anscombe, 2000). However, intentions are more than a predominant desire to achieve a result but include both the willingness to act and an anticipated plan or pathway to follow (Setiya, 2022). Intentions may be motivated by a sense of duty or obligation but the degree to which a person is willing and capable of making the effort to fulfill a responsibility is a far more accurate measure of intention than simply acknowledging that a responsibility exists (Mele, 2003).

Intention also involves more than simply expressing a desire to achieve an outcome or the verbal acknowledgement of a moral obligation (Mele & Sverdlik, 1996). Intentions ultimately reflect an actor’s values, based upon individual cognitive beliefs and attitudes, as well as the importance of specific actions that enable them to affirm those values (cf. Coleman, Bahnan, & Kelkar, 2011; Al-Suqri & Al-Kharusi, 2015). The strength of the beliefs and attitudes and the perceived capacity to carry out the desired actions are important in affirming individual intentions (Morwitz & Munz, 2021).

Conative intentions reflect the personal ways that individuals seek to carry out desired goals and reflect the unique nature of those individuals and how they interact (Bandura, 2006). Dornyei and Otto (1998) have written extensively about the degree to which a person’s commitment to achieving a goal is profoundly important in determining whether an intention will ultimately translate into a future behavior. Duckworth (2018) has explained that a person’s passion to achieve an outcome and their persistence and dedication in their preparation are critical factors that affect performance far more than mere talent. The perception of one’s ability to carry out an action that will directly lead to a desired outcome also influences intentions (Armitage & Conner, 2010). According to the Theory of Reasoned Action, the greatest predictor of any action or behavior is the intention to perform that behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015).

3.4 Behaviors in Action

In understanding what constitutes behaviors and actions, there is some disagreement among scholars. For example, Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) define actions and behaviors as the way in which a person reacts toward a particular situation, a person, or context which can be either simple or very complex; How a person responds can be meaningful and important in a myriad of ways and can convey normative values that may often be associated with expectations about performance. In contrast, Honderich (2015) defined an action as an event performed for an intended purpose, but how that action is performed conveys a great deal about how the actor feels about that purpose.

People take action and perform behaviors because 1) they intend to achieve a goal; 2) they possess the necessary knowledge, skills, abilities, and other resources to perform required tasks; and 3) there are no unanticipated

environmental limitations or contextual constraints to prevent them from carrying out those intentions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). Four critical factors are commonly acknowledged as necessary in determining the ability to carry out an intention and translate that intention into action (Montano & Kasprzyk, 2015).

- **Specificity** -- The behavioral intention must adequately match the specific nature of the action to be performed and its respective elements (Sheeran,
- **Stability** – The consistency in desire or stability of the intention between the time that the intention is expressed and the action is to be taken must be maintained Bamberg, Ajzen & Schmidt, 2003).
- **Consistency** – The consistency and predictability of the conditions of the environment which exist between the time of the intention and the time of intended action affect the ability to achieve an intended result (Mayor & Sackett, 2003).
- **Control** – The individual must accurately understand the factors essential to perform a task and must have the capacity to control those factors (Yzer, 2012).

Actions and behaviors are subject to the subjective perceptions of the individuals who are involved. The accuracy of those perceptions is dependent upon acquiring the correct information, assessing and interpreting its meaning, and identifying an appropriate intended response or action which is dependent upon that accuracy (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Behaviors are directly affected by the cognitive and affective factors that make up the decision to trust, with perceptions of the trustworthiness of another party being a function of that other person's competence or ability; beneficence, kindness, and personal caring; and character, integrity, and honesty (Hassandoust, Logeswaran, & Kazerouni, 2011; Caldwell & Ndalamba, 2017).

4. Applications to Quiet Quitting

This section examines the four elements of the Theory of Reasoned Action and explains how each element manifests in the Quiet Quitting decision. This review provides insights about the practical nature of beliefs, actions, and intentions in determining behaviors related to Quiet Quitting.

4.1 Implications of Cognitive Beliefs

The research about employee engagement and the employer-employee relationship gives strong indication that Quiet Quitting is associated with what individual employees cognitively believe about their supervisors, their company, and how they are treated (Smith, 2022). At the cognitive level, this response is based upon a multitude of job-related factors that make up an organizational culture and how culture is translated into policies, practices, programs, and systems (Schein & Schein, 2016).

The evidence is clear that employees seek full-time employment, a partnership relationship with their supervisors that treats them respectfully, the opportunity to learn and grow in their careers, and meaningful work with a significant purpose (Clifton & Harter, 2019). When employees perceive that they are treated as commodities or interchangeable entities, they respond by withholding their commitment and are reluctant to extend themselves to take on extra-role assignments or put in extra effort (Erkutlu, 2008). Job Characteristics Theory explains that the nature of the job and the degree that employees are involved with work as active partners directly affect individual performance.

Organizations and leaders that refrain from empowering employees or that do not invest in employee training and development have increasingly seen employees respond with a limited commitment to their work (Hill & Huq, 2010). Baloch, Ali & Zaman (2014) found that employees responding to a transformational leadership style that included an investment in employee development resulted in those employees responding with a significantly greater commitment to work than employees working in organizations led by leaders who exhibited a quid pro quo or transactional leadership style.

4.2 Implications of Affective Attitudes

How employees feel that they are treated by their supervisors and managers was found by Gallup researchers as contributing to 70% of the variance in employee performance and organizational achievement (Clifton & Harter, 2019). Stinglhamber and colleagues (2015) had earlier found that employee attitudes toward their work directly affected the leadership style of their supervisors and that leaders who demonstrated a commitment to employee growth generated more outstanding affective commitment.

In their extensive research about employee willingness to engage in extra-role and organizational citizenship behaviors, Organ, Podsakoff, and Mackenzie (2005) explained that the antecedents to this behavior included trust in one's leader, perceived organizational support, leader-member exchange, and "core" transformational leadership behavior. In

addition, leaders positively impact the willingness of employees to go the extra mile and their commitment to their organizations by articulating a vision, modeling organization values, supporting the acceptance of group goals, establishing high- performance expectations, and providing intellectual stimulation (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000).

Creating an organizational culture that treats employees as valued partners and shares information about the organization's future not only honors the "stewardship" nature of ethical leadership but communicates to employees that their efforts are acknowledged, appreciated, and supported (Block, 2013). Employee attitudes and the desire to engage in Quiet Quitting are far less likely to arise when an organization's culture incorporates aligned Human Resource practices characterized by High-Performance Work Systems (Beer, 2009).

4.3 Implications of Conative Intentions

As a response to how employees perceive that they are treated, Quiet Quitting is the deliberate intention of employees to limit the personal commitment to their organization because of how they perceive which they have been treated (Pandey, 2022). Yikilmaz (2023) has suggested that the Quiet Quitting intention is motivated by a desire to protect one's mental and emotional health and well-being in response to an unhealthy organizational culture.

Mahand and Caldwell (2023) identified five factors which they cited as shortcomings that motivated employees in their intention to withhold their best efforts at work.

- *Lack of Commitment to Career Development* – Employees expect their employers to care enough about them to help them to not only succeed on the job but enhance their potential career value (Kelly, 2022).
- *Failure to Value Employees* – Employees report that their managers and supervisors are often abusive and subject them to patterned harassment (Aubrey, 2012). Worline and Dutton (2017) document the decline in empathy and compassion in organizations as a major reason for employees to engage in Quiet Quitting.
- *Increasing Employee Disconnection* – As employers have moved toward hiring part-time, temporary, and contingent employees (Katz & Krueger, 2019), their employees feel a decreased sense of belonging as organization members (Hopke, 2022). The result is an increase in stress, burnout, and employee depression (Clifton, 2022).
- *Limited Employee Autonomy* – Micromanaging behaviors on the part of supervisors and the unwillingness to empower employees have reduced the sense of employee ownership and engagement (Lee, Willis, & Tian, 2018). Employees' disengagement behavior can increase to the point where they not only withhold commitment but work contrary to their employer's best interests (Clifton & Harter, 2019).
- *Decline in Organizational Trust* – The steady decline in trust and leaders and organizations is a major contributor to the intention to Quiet Quit and undermines the credibility of leaders and organizations (Harrington, 2017). The increase in distrust directly affects the intention of employees to withhold their best efforts (Edelman, 2023).

Each of these five factors contributes to employees' intentions to withhold their best efforts and contributes to predictable limitations in organizations' ability to serve their customers or retain their top employees (Sull & Sull, 2022).

4.4 Implications of Behaviors in Action

As beliefs, attitudes, and intentions about Quiet Quitting are translated into Quiet Quitting behaviors, organizations suffer in readily identifiable ways. The cost of turnover, especially the turnover of an organization's best employees, imposes a huge cost on organizations and undermines productivity, creativity, and innovation (Cameron, 2021). The Quiet Quitting of key employees who have established relationships with key customers undermines the ability of an organization to compete with other companies globally to create or maintain a sustainable competitive advantage (Sayyadi & Provitera, 2022; Nordgren & Bjors, 2023).

At a time when organizations have acknowledged the importance of high employee engagement to succeed in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous global marketplace, organizations have come to acknowledge that Quiet Quitting employees erode their organization's ability to compete (Hancock & Schaninger, 2022). Taking productive and proactive steps to address the Quiet Quitting problem has been recognized as critically necessary for organizations to revitalize their cultures (Serenko, 2023).

5. Contributions of the Paper

The modern organization has found itself in a difficult and challenging position in the wake of the changing attitudes of employees. In this paper about Quiet Quitting, we have sought to add clarity to the discussion about this phenomenon and our paper makes four important contributions for practitioners and academic scholars.

1. **We identify the importance of the Theory of Reasoned Action as a conceptual framework for understanding Quiet Quitting.** By explaining how employees have made the decision to engage in Quiet Quitting, we offer insights into the root causes at the behavioral level that influence employees' decision to limit their workplace commitment.
2. **We provide scholars and practitioners with an extensive set of well-documented resources to access to study Quiet Quitting.** The research about Quiet Quitting is relatively limited, because the topic is relatively new in the business lexicon and we cite a wide variety of sources about Quiet Quitting.
3. **We affirm and reinforce the importance of leaders and organizations addressing the Quiet Quitting problem in a proactive way.** By documenting the factors that have led to Quiet Quitting, we offer insights that enable practitioners and scholars to examine the root causes of Quiet Quitting.
4. **We emphasize the importance of organizations and their leaders in rethinking the factors that have resulted in a decline in employee commitment and trust that undermine organizations' competitive capabilities.** Trust in leaders and organizations has declined for a variety of reasons and scholars and practitioners can benefit by looking for productive solutions to the Quiet Quitting problem that pervades the workplace.

Each of these four contributions enables scholars and practitioners to thoughtfully engage in collaborative dialogue to address the importance of increasing employee commitment and engagement which are so critical to successful organizations.

6. Opportunities for Further Research

The Quiet Quitting phenomenon has raised serious questions about the credibility of present-day organizational governance and management theory assumptions. Today's workforce communicates loudly and clearly to employers that employees are no longer willing to be treated as fungible commodities. Because so few employees are fully engaged at work (Clifton & Harter, 2019), the dysfunctional trends of management and the failure to adequately train leaders and supervisors demand being studied immediately by business schools and their faculties.

Top Management Teams' roles and assumptions about their obligations owed to employees also merit careful analysis and extensive research. The fact is well established that Top Management Teams are responsible for an organization's culture in the management literature (Schein & Schein, 2016), but it is nonetheless clear that the modern organization has struggled to create a culture that earns employee commitment and trust (Sull & Sull, 2022).

Finally, the decline in trust and commitment in organizations raises serious questions about the capabilities of Human Resource Professionals in modern organizations. Organizations need to understand how to direct those professionals in the performance of their jobs and have failed to recognize the importance of that function in dealing with the many issues associated with Quiet Quitting (Jamali, Ellera, & Caldwell, 2023).

Understanding these issues by conducting extensive applied research is essential to addressing Quiet Quitting and developing timely solutions to the organizational dysfunctions that have led to its widespread occurrence. Therefore, we urge scholars and practitioners to work together in partnership to address each of these issues. Quiet Quitting is a response to the failures of the modern organization to honor its obligation to employees and can only be addressed when it is understood and responded to constructively and healthily (Hopke, 2022).

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