

Which Came First, Quiet Quitting or Quiet Firing? The Paradox of Constructive Discharge vs Employee Disengagement

Sandylane Y. Oquendo
Prairie View A&M University

Reginald L. Bell
Prairie View A&M University

Erick Kitenge
Prairie View A&M University

The “first cause” paradox is famous because Aristotle demonstrated the nature of the problematic of logic with first cause arguments [exemplified in the literature by “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?”]. Knowing that, logic is governed by the principle of noncontradiction which dictates that there appears to be a cause for every effect. Because the egg is essential to get a chicken and a chicken is essential for laying an egg, the nature of cause-effect arguments demonstrates a paradox. Eggs hatching chickens and chickens laying eggs exemplify a state of infinite regress. There has not been any rational answer that could be given that does not violate the principle of noncontradiction in thought; no genuine reason could resolve the ad infinitum. Accordingly, we examined the relationship of Constructive Discharge (when managers sneakily created hostility directed at employees to make them resign—currently called “Quiet Firing”) designed to motivate voluntary employee turnover. Conversely, Quiet Quitting is the apathy of employees who do the bare minimum to keep their jobs. We found answers in the literature from 2014 to 2024 using search terms “Quiet Quitting” and “Quiet Firing” in the title of the article.

Keywords: constructive discharge, turnover, infinite regress, paradox, Quiet Firing, Quiet Quitting

INTRODUCTION

In this review of the related literature, we set out to resolve the question of which came first, “Quiet Firing” or “Quiet Quitting?” Is the relationship between the two purely paradoxical? Is it an infinite regress not determinable as to which is the cause and which is the effect? Is there a first cause fallacy when a researcher attempts to explain the origin of employees’ disengagement to the bare minimum of their job descriptions, while at the same time, manager’s make every attempt to construct an environment that becomes so detestable to targeted employees that they quit their jobs voluntarily, negating the need for their termination?

The Quiet Quitting phenomenon has been of keen interest to academicians in recent years; however, Quiet Firing is often the overlooked antecedent or consequence to Quiet Quitting. The paradox, “This sentence is false” is furthermore an example of infinite regress, because if the sentence is false, then how could it be true? And, if it is true then how could it be false? There is no secret as to what is taking place in workplace environments in recent years. There are extremes on both sides: tyrannical supervisors and vengeful employees. Table 1 showcases, in great detail, the extreme behaviors engaged by supervisors and employees; from an article titled “Three Easy Steps to Becoming A Leader-Supervisor” Bell and Kennebrew (2022) layout a visual depiction of events that occurred in modern workplaces, that if not recorded on video, many people would believe such behaviors were fiction.

TABLE 1
SUPERVISORS AS TYRANTS: EMPLOYEES AS SABOTEURS

TYRANNICAL SUPERVISORS	VINDICTIVE EMPLOYEES
<p><i>Who are tyrannical supervisors?</i></p> <p>Tyrannical supervisors do not measure-up to be the same evil as the dogmatic tyrants of antiquity. Notorious tyrants throughout history have ruled with iron fists: they eventually established themselves as “demigods,” with totalitarian control over multitudes of other human beings. Tyrants of olden times literally ordered the deaths of millions of people, based on arbitrary impunity. History has shown tyrants the world-over, who were so evil, so despised in memory, that their names need not defile this essay.</p> <p>Employees label a supervisor a “tyrant” that merely exists as a presupposition within a localized corporate culture. A presupposition is an unspoken understanding of the meaning of a claim perceived to be prima facie within cultural context. If we say, this math problem is so simple, even Stephen can solve it correctly. What is our presupposition (unspoken claim) about Stephen’s intelligence? The presupposition is that Stephen is not an intelligent person, at least when it comes to solving math equations. A frontline supervisor is not the same as a Zulu chief rumored to have put to death thousands of his own people purely because he was mourning the natural death of his beloved mother.</p> <p>Tyrannical supervisors Hoover over employees, barking commands, arguing superfluous points just to be right. Tyrannical supervisors are last word junkies. They allow their favored employees to flaunt rule breaking, while holding less favored employees to a double standard. These types of tyrants are obnoxious, and they pick fights by deliberately criticizing employees’ work, well beyond levels of absurdity.</p>	<p><i>How do employees get revenge against tyrants?</i></p> <p>Even more so, employees seek creative revenge against tyrannical supervisors whom they loathe. Tyrannical supervisors destroy cultural cohesion, yet employees do not just sit idly by and take abuse; they seek revenge, whether coordinated or uncoordinated, scripted or unscripted. There is nothing more culturally destructive than for a supervisor to have angry employees filled with enmity towards that supervisor, taking out their revenge on customers, and eventually the profits. Employees will be indefatigable when it comes to getting even with their boss. There are numerous examples of employees gone wild. Employees who hate their immediate supervisor incrementally destroy the business. Problem culture is most apparent at the drive thru. Hostile employees deliberately mishandle orders when they consistently “get orders wrong.” Angry workers will deliberately cause customers to return purchases, especially food orders with ingredients missing or with ingredients added the customer specifically did not want. Getting the last word in with customers, inflaming passions on purpose is a tactic. Spiteful workers will show late for shifts, or not give proper notice when absent for an entire shift. Employees leaving the dining areas filthy, toilets un-sanitized, and parking lots cluttered with debris are signs and symptoms of chaotic supervision. These types of in-kind hostilities demonstrate to the immediate supervisor exactly what workers perceive that supervisor has been dishing out!</p> <p>Angry employees in the past have actually committed felonies on the job. They have been caught maliciously tampering with food, a felony</p>

They are liars about small matters, and they break promises. They assign disliked employees who have not been trained impossible tasks, with malice aforethought designed to escalate tensions in order to justify disciplinary abuses. The worst type of tyrannical supervisor is one who shows poor judgment under stress.

Recently, a supervisor engaged in horrible act, all while caught on surveillance video. There is a lawsuit underway stemming from a boiled water-throwing incident at Taco Bell, which led to a 16-year-old girl and her aunt suffering third-degree burns, and potential brain damage for the aunt. The two female customers had permission to enter into a locked dining area after the lobby had closed. The reasoning was to sort out an order gone wrong. A verbal confrontation occurred between employees and the two female customers; the two female customers, as seen on video, angrily rounded the corner of the front counter, heading behind the cash-wrap and where they were met by a pitcher of boiling water thrown directly on them by the supervisor. Supervisors who attack customers often set a tone that no business can withstand for long. (pp. 9-10)

in most States. A Burger King employee, for example, a DNA test months later revealed, spit into a Vancouver police officer's burger at the drive-thru, as reported on April 6, 2010 by the kgw.com. The teen was arrested, and later punished with imprisonment when the DNA was proved to be his. On February 20, 2014, a Pizza Hut manager was fired for peeing in the kitchen sink, according to abcnews.go.com. No reasonable person would argue that these specific types of misbehavior are a representative sample of the fast food industry, nor its workers; however, the misdeeds of troubled employees occur when corporate culture has gone awry. Leader-supervisors can prevent such behaviors by following sage advice from the gurus of management philosophy. (pp. 10-11)

Source: Bell, R. L., & Kennebrew, D. (2022). Three easy steps to becoming a leader-supervisor. *Supervision*, 83(12), 9-13.

In instances where violence and egregious unlawful behavior happens, both supervisors and employees need to be removed, legally and immediately for their dangerous behaviors. Conversely, this study is concerned with behaviors that are not so extreme, but more mundane, banal and subtler; the daily behaviors from two worldviews: 1) managers who use sabotage designed to cause voluntary resignation, and 2) employees engaged in apathy designed to hold-on to employment by doing the very least to remain employed.

Coercive versus Aversive Control in Management

Coercive management refers to the exercise of authority by managers to ensure compliance, often through the threat of punitive measures when employees fail to meet specified goals (Quain, 2019). Arubayi (2023) elaborates that coercive behavior involves compelling employees to follow directives by imposing penalties such as demotions, salary reductions, or even termination. According to French and Raven (2004), coercive power is a formalized type of authority where managers use social, emotional, or economic pressure to force compliance, with employees sometimes unaware of this influence. Employees are integral to organizational success, as they are responsible for utilizing non-living resources like machinery and capital to generate output, making them indispensable to operations (Sule, 2013). Employee satisfaction, as defined by Locke and others, is a critical determinant of job performance, where higher satisfaction fosters greater commitment, and lower satisfaction leads to negative attitudes and disengagement (Idrus, 2020; Locke, 1976).

In contrast, aversive leadership operates through punishment, threats, and reprimands but tends to employ these tactics in a more subtle or passive-aggressive manner. Unlike coercive management, aversive leaders often withhold positive reinforcements, such as promotions or rewards, and rely on verbal or non-verbal admonishments to shape employee behavior (Fatima et al., 2018). Research by Guo et al. (2024)

suggests a positive correlation between tyrannical leadership and knowledge hiding, behaviors that align with the concept of "Quiet Firing." Such negative managerial tactics may prompt employees to engage in "Quiet Quitting" as a means of preserving their well-being.

Incivility has been a subject of academic research, but Quiet Firing and Quiet Quitting are not so direct nor are they so obvious as incivility seen in communication studies, i.e., "*yelling at employees, and perhaps cursing them out, verbally attacking them and being biased in performance evaluations are behaviors that predict workplace violence*" (Joyce & Bell, 2010). It is not the employees who quit, but the ones who stick around, doing the bare minimum that make managers wish them gone. It is not the managers who terminate the employment of workers for legal reasons, but the ones who rig environments constructed in a way to cause workers to voluntarily quit, hard to prove harm legally. But how does the seeming paradox of the contradiction of Quiet Firing and Quiet Quitting get started in the workplace between managers and employees? The research attempts to answer the following question.

Research Question

RQ1: Which came first, "*Quiet Quitting*" or "*Quiet Firing*," or is the relationship truly a demonstration of infinite regress?

THE LAW OF NON-CONTRADICTION

The Law of Non-Contradiction (LNC) is a fundamental principle of classical logic which states that contradictory propositions cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense. In other words, something cannot both "be" and "not be" simultaneously. For example, a statement like "the door is open" and "the door is not open" cannot both be true at the same time. For this article the authors use the definition of LNC from Book IV of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle. In the fourth chapter LNC is defined as "is impossible for anything at the same time to be and not be" (Aristotle & Aristotle, 1933). The Law of Non-Contradiction has been subject to scholar scrutiny due to certain concepts defying the law, and example of this is the chicken and the egg paradox. Which one comes first? One cannot have a chicken without an egg, and one cannot have an egg without a chicken. In a similar case is this phenomenon that the authors are looking to answer the research question.

In the fall of 1965, American philosopher George Mavrodes from the University of Michigan examined Aristotle's concept of the "negative demonstration" with the intent of proving it to be fallacious. However, Mavrodes did not argue that the Law of Non-Contradiction (LNC) itself was false. Instead, through his investigation, Mavrodes aimed to demonstrate three key points: (1) "The LNC is true," (2) "it is self-evident," and (3) "it is assumed by all rational men or presupposed by all rational speech, argument, or action" (Mavrodes, 1965). His work underscores that Aristotle viewed the LNC as both irrefutable and essential for coherent thought and discourse, serving as the foundation for logical consistency and rational debate.

A study conducted by Asongwe et al. (2024) explores the evolution of the concept of substance in relation to the law of non-contradiction. Their findings underpin the coherence of Aristotle's metaphysics, reinforcing the idea that substances must possess consistent attributes and exist in a manner that aligns with the fundamental nature of reality. Therefore, following this line of reasoning, the findings of this study should provide a logical response to the research question.

First Cause Paradox

In Loke's book, *The Teleological and Kalam Cosmological Arguments Revisited*, he asks, "What is First Cause?" He follows with, "Is it God, or a part of the universe as postulated by Hawking (Hawking, 1996)?" (Loke, 2022). In Chapter Six, Loke (2022) explains that the First Cause Paradox, also known as the Infinite Regress Paradox, arises from discussions about the origins of existence and the nature of causality. This paradox questions the idea of an initial cause or "first cause" for everything that exists. The main components of the paradox are as follows:

First, in traditional metaphysics, everything that exists has a cause, leading to a chain of causes where each effect has a preceding cause. Second, regarding infinite regress, if every cause requires a prior cause, this raises the question: What caused the first cause? This scenario can result in an infinite regress of causes, prompting one to inquire what caused each preceding cause endlessly. Third, there is a need for a First Cause to avoid the infinite regress problem. Philosophers such as Aristotle and later thinkers posited the necessity of a "First Cause" or "Uncaused Cause" that does not require a prior cause. This First Cause is often identified with God or a necessary being. Fourth, challenges arise from critics of the First Cause argument, who question whether the concept of an uncaused cause is coherent. They argue that if everything must have a cause, then proposing an uncaused cause may violate the principle of causality.

Construct Validity of a Psychological Measure

The physiological nature of the cause-effect relationship is easily observed, but the time in relation to the first cause is what constitutes the paradox. We know that effect can cause and cause has effect, but which got started first? In the work environment, it appears perplexing as to which party (managers or employees) causes the other to an effect. However, there is a way to measure the variable as a latent (invisible) variable by validating it as a construct. Several recent studies have identified and validated both Quiet Quitting and Quiet Firing as psychological measures with construct validity, with Cronbach Alphas ranging from 0.790 to 0.890 where the two factor scores were significantly correlated to the scales (Anand et al., 2024; Karrani et al., 2024). Karadas and Çevik (2024) showed:

“results of the confirmatory factor analysis, the scale was found to be significant at the structural equation model level ($p = 0.000$)...There was a strongly significant negative correlation between the total QQ and QF scale score and the happiness at work scale score ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.001$), and a strongly significant negative correlation between the total QQ and QF score and the person-organization fit scale score ($r = -0.55$, $p < 0.001$)...Cronbach's α value was determined to be 0.890 for the overall QQ and QF scale, 0.790 for the quiet quitting intentions subscale and 0.880 for the perceived quiet firing subscale...” (pp.4-5).

When bringing the First Cause Paradox into the Quiet Quitting/Quiet Firing context, an argument can be made that Quiet Quitting is a response to Quiet Firing, regardless of when the terms became popular. Eidlin (2024) explains that "Quiet Quitting" implies that employees are expected to go above and beyond their primary job duties to maintain their side of the employment relationship. However, employers have neglected their responsibilities for years, implementing mass layoffs, shutting down facilities, and engaging in union-busting. These actions have been followed by strategies like work redesign and algorithmic management, which push workers to do more with fewer resources. As a result, fair wages, job security, and benefits have become less attainable. Workers are now encouraged to embrace "flexibility" and "passion" in their roles, with even low-wage employees being urged to treat their work as a personal calling rather than simply a job. The literature was reviewed in lieu of the aforementioned research question.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "Quiet Quitting" was introduced by economist Mark Bolger in 2009 to describe employees who disengage and perform only the bare minimum (Campton et al., 2023). Although coined over a decade ago, the concept gained widespread attention in 2022, primarily through social media, where Millennials (Galanis et al., 2023) and Generation Z popularized it as a trend (Ochis, 2024). "Quiet Quitters" are defined as employees who limit their efforts to what is contractually required, refusing to take on additional tasks (Formica & Sfodera, 2022).

What is Quiet Quitting?

Nunes and Pimenta (2024) outline two perspectives on Quiet Quitting. The first highlights the potential risks to business management, where employees merely meeting minimum requirements may decrease productivity and influence others to adopt similar behavior, ultimately harming organizational profits (Campton et al., 2023; Hamouche et al., 2023). The second perspective frames Quiet Quitting as a boundary-setting practice, where employees complete their duties without exceeding expectations or working extra hours unless compensation is renegotiated. This approach aims to improve work-life balance and prevent burnout (Hamouche et al., 2023).

Generation Z, the youngest workforce cohort, is noted to be the least engaged and most affected by stress and burnout (Pendell & Vander Helm, 2022). As a result, Quiet Quitting has become a global phenomenon, with over half of the workforce reportedly engaging in it, raising concerns about the long-term impact on both organizations and employees (Yikilmaz, 2022). The trend, which emerged on social media (Kilpatrick, 2022), has sparked debate, urging companies to reconsider their workplace environments (Ellis & Yang, 2022). Some view Quiet Quitting as harmful, while others see it as a response to rising work demands (Hopke, 2022; Yikilmaz, 2022). There are also differing opinions on its psychological effects (Hetler, 2024), though some economists suggest the market will self-regulate the phenomenon (Johnson, 2023).

From a broader perspective, reduced working hours have been linked to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has reshaped workforce attitudes toward time spent at work (Lee & Varon, 2020). Business experts are calling for HR reforms to address these changes (Klotz & Bolino, 2022). Scholars like Oquendo and Bell (2024) propose that organizations adopt hybrid work approaches and implement Kouzes and Posner's "Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership®" to build collaboration and trust in remote settings while leveraging technology and employee feedback to foster a positive work culture.

Despite its modern label, Quiet Quitting is not a novel idea. Historically, a similar tactic called "work to rule" has been used in industrial action, where workers disrupt business operations without violating laws (Lord, 2022). Quiet Quitting, however, is more individualized, with employees silently protesting poor work conditions and prioritizing their mental health. Many reject the idea that work should dominate their lives, choosing instead to focus on their health, well-being, and personal relationships (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic may have further encouraged this reflection, as more employees began to value time spent with family and personal activities. A survey found that 57% of quiet quitters reported improved work-life balance, with this figure rising to 65% among parents with young children (Davis et al., 2022).

Detert (2023) suggests the term "calibrated contributing" better reflects the behavior of quiet quitters, as it indicates an effort to ensure fairness by matching work output with compensation. This idea is closely linked to the "acting your wage" movement (Kudhail, 2022). According to Gallup's 2022 report, Quiet Quitting continues to grow, with 19% of the global workforce now classified as "actively disengaged" (Gallup, 2022).

What is Quiet Firing?

In a TIME magazine article published on September 10, 2022, Burga describes Quiet Firing as a term popularized by social media influencer DeAndre Brown in a viral TikTok video from August 2022. It refers to a subtle, passive-aggressive workplace practice where managers make it difficult for employees to succeed, pushing them to quit voluntarily. Burga (2022) explained that Quiet Firing often includes actions like withholding raises or promotions, excluding employees from important meetings, providing little to no feedback, or subjecting them to excessive scrutiny. Yikilmaz (2022) adds examples such as increased workloads, limiting participation in new projects, and blocking access to career advancements. The concepts of Quiet Firing and Quiet Quitting are interconnected, both reflecting hidden workplace dynamics that can harm employee morale and well-being. Quiet Firing should not be automatically used interchangeably with what the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL, 2024) defines as Constructive Discharge—

which is an actionable offense that can lead to fines, including injunctive relief, civil penalties, compensatory damages, lost wages, civil actions, and punitive damages!

Constructive Discharge

"In general, the term 'constructive discharge' is when a worker's resignation or retirement may be found not to be voluntary because the employer has created a hostile or intolerable work environment or has applied other forms of pressure or coercion which forced the employee to quit or resign. This often arises when an employer makes significant and severe changes in the terms and conditions of a worker's employment. What constitutes a constructive discharge is usually defined in state law and varies from state to state."

Source DOL (2024): <https://webapps.dol.gov/elaws/eta/warn/glossary.asp?p=constructive%20discharge>

The phenomenon of Quiet Firing, which is subtler than Constructive Discharge, reflects an organization's culture. Organizational culture is shaped by a company's values, the treatment of employees, and how well leadership aligns with organizational priorities (Kumar, 2016). When leaders consistently model and reinforce these values, they earn the trust and commitment of their workforce (Schein & Schein, 2016). Companies with strong, positive cultures achieve higher employee engagement and experience lower turnover rates (Ellera et al., 2023). In contrast, unhealthy organizational cultures create toxic work environments where employees feel disrespected, unable to be honest with managers, and treated unfairly (Mirza, 2019). Research shows that abusive workplace behavior can spread, becoming the organizational norm (Priesemuth, 2020).

Toxic cultures lead to high turnover, with nearly one in five U.S. employees leaving their organizations due to poor culture, often citing weak leadership as the cause (Sull & Sull, 2022). Attributes of toxic cultures include disrespect, non-inclusiveness, unethical behavior, cutthroat competition, and abusive treatment (Sull et al., 2022). These conditions, termed "the great discontent," reflect the growing dissatisfaction of employees with ineffective leadership (Hirsch, 2021). While extreme, toxic cultures highlight a broader issue of ineffective leadership, which is common across many organizations. Gallup research shows that companies fail to hire or promote the best candidates 82% of the time, and 70% of the variance in employee engagement is attributed to managerial abilities (Beck & Harter, 2014). Leaders' inability to create systems and policies aligned with organizational values exacerbates these issues, further undermining organizational culture (Schein & Schein, 2016).

In response to disengaged employees, some organizations adopt a "command and control" approach, characterized by a "do it or else" philosophy, as exemplified by leaders like Elon Musk (Sander, 2023). This management style is increasingly seen as disrespectful and out of touch with modern workforce expectations (Williams et al., 2013). One troubling consequence is the practice of "Quiet Firing," where employers make work conditions intolerable, pressuring employees to quit voluntarily. This passive-aggressive approach has been described as a reaction to Quiet Quitting, sending a message that underperformance will not be tolerated (Borchers, 2022).

Ultimately, the interplay between Quiet Quitting and Quiet Firing underscores the necessity for organizations to cultivate a supportive and transparent culture. Failure to do so may not only drive talent away but also foster an environment where employees feel compelled to disengage rather than thrive. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for leaders aiming to retain their workforce and promote a healthier organizational climate.

A substantial body of economic literature examines the factors influencing job quits and employee effort. Quit rates are typically pro-cyclical, peaking during economic expansions and declining during recessions (Lazear & Spletzer, 2012). While higher wages are a common reason for quitting (Tanaka et al., 2023), non-wage factors also significantly contribute to turnover. Job disamenities, such as hazardous conditions and limited promotion opportunities (Cottini et al., 2011), as well as perceptions of fairness (Dube et al., 2019), play important roles. Job satisfaction, linked to factors like pay, job security, and the nature of work, is a reliable predictor of job tenure and quitting behavior (Clark, 2001).

Research addressing job quits and Quiet Quitting in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is limited. However, del Rio-Chanona et al. (2023) indicate that mental health issues exacerbated by the pandemic contributed to high quit rates in the U.S. in 2021, suggesting that psychological burdens led many to reconsider their employment during what has been termed the Great Resignation.

In addition to quitting factors, studies on job effort reveal that financial incentives can motivate increased employee performance. According to Akerlof and Yellen (1988) “fair wage-effort hypothesis,” employees adjust their effort based on perceived wage fairness, meaning that once a fair wage is established, further pay increases may not lead to greater effort. Empirical evidence supports the notion that performance-based pay enhances effort (Charness et al., 2020), but excessive managerial control may decrease motivation (Falk & Kosfeld, 2006). Furthermore, non-monetary factors, such as the significance of work, are shown to enhance labor supply and productivity (Grant et al., 2013).

Conflict Management

Conflict management, as defined in the "Conflict Management" textbook, refers to the process of identifying, resolving, and managing conflicts within an organizational environment. Conflict resolution is a critical aspect of human resource management, requiring managers to possess negotiation skills, the ability to discern the root causes of conflicts, and strategies for achieving constructive outcomes (Zhyvko et al., 2024). Woodard et al., (2024) argue that leadership procrastination on conflict management can be a source of eroded integrity. In many cases when managers pussyfoot around and procrastinate resolving conflicts, they can become the source of conflict, whether psychological (one manager) or social (more than one manager); a direct quote from Bell’s (2013) surmising of what causes managerial induced conflict.

“When managers feel pressure from deciding on opposing options, attractive or unattractive, conflict occurs. Managers become the source of bad conflict when beleaguered by anxiety; they put off final decisions. The two levels of conflict are psychological (intrapersonal) and social (interpersonal). Removing managers as a source of conflict, in most cases, requires managers to weigh options wisely and make concise decisions” (p. 3).

Serenko (2024) outlines how human capital managers should respond to “Quiet Quitting” by promoting knowledge sharing, capturing valuable insights from disengaging employees, reconsidering termination decisions, conducting knowledge audits, and prioritizing high performers. Furthermore, they should introduce burnout management programs, ensure fair treatment between managers and staff, and provide appropriate compensation for exceptional efforts. Policymakers, in turn, should focus on preventing the depletion of national human capital by promoting work-life balance as a core value, supporting employee mental health initiatives, and investing in innovations to improve employee efficiency.

Employee Engagement

Kahn (1990) ethnographic research explores how employees perceive themselves within their work environments and examines how work-related concepts influence their levels of engagement and disengagement. He argues that engagement is not a static condition; instead, it fluctuates and encompasses the physical, cognitive, and emotional expressions individuals exhibit in their roles (Kahn, 1990). Ochis (2024) observes that the understanding of engagement has largely remained consistent since Kahn's initial study, with later researchers such as May et al. (2004) and Rich et al. (2010) predominantly utilizing quantitative approaches.

Furthermore, engagement is closely linked to the concept of flow, which Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes as a state of complete immersion characterized by a seamless interaction between individuals and their environment. This flow state involves intense concentration and requires minimal conscious effort. The discourse surrounding engagement frequently incorporates the theme of employee empowerment, as noted by Albrecht and Andreetta (2011) and Alagarsamy et al. (2020). Thomas and Velthouse (1990)

introduced an empowerment model that encompasses four key psychological dimensions: meaningfulness, impact, competence, and choice.

SUMMARY OF OUR FINDINGS

A significant factor contributing to Quiet Quitting is the increasing disconnection among employees. Bangura and Lourens (2023) identify employee engagement as the primary challenge facing human resource management (HRM) in organizations in 2023. Other scholars, including Filstad et al. (2019) and Caldwell and Anderson (2019), also emphasize the relationship between collaboration and employee engagement. However, merely being a member of an organization does not inherently foster a sense of belonging (Adejumo, 2021). When employees feel uninformed or excluded from work-related decisions, they often experience isolation and detachment from both their colleagues and the organization (Holland, 2019).

Research Question Answered

RQ1: *Which came first, Quiet Quitting or Quiet Firing, or is the relationship truly a demonstration of infinite regress?*

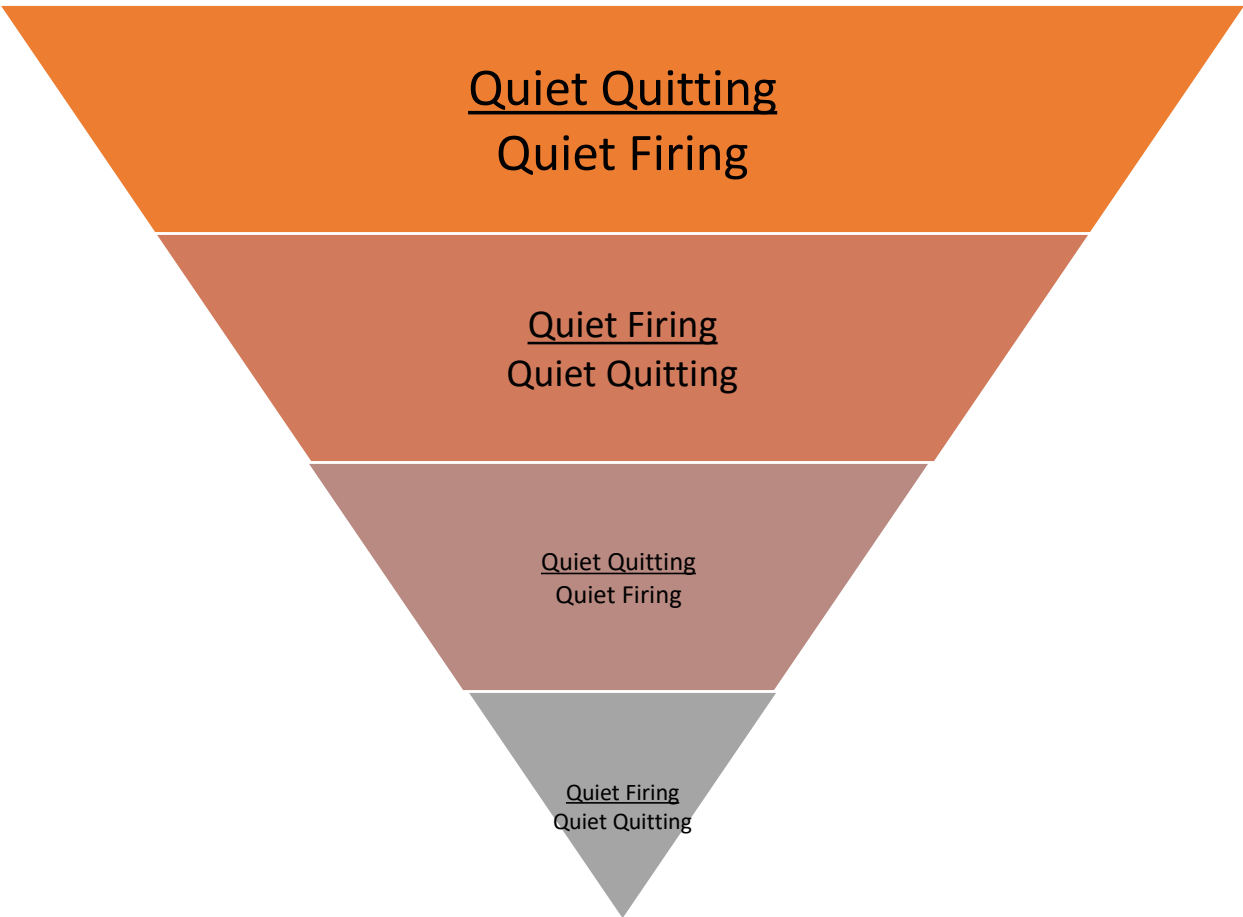
RQ1 Answer: *There appears that a genuine paradox does exist between quiet firing and Quiet Quitting; there is no true way to get at the data directly empirically as neither party would be willing to confess their guiltiness. The literature seems to glance at the paradox by making certain that both Quiet Quitting and quiet firing are true constructs that are perceived real [with hidden variables that can in theory be compared by indirect measurements, e.g., $2 + __ = 4$: a student who writes “2” in the blank space is an indirect measure of a mental process of addition knowledge that took place in the student’s mind, a phenomenon called the “unobservable variable” (Kerlinger, 1973)]. The relationship might not amount to infinite regress, as is the case with “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?”*

There are economic implications for business. Figure 1 is a depiction of the infinite regress that defies the answer to which came first, Quiet Firing or Quiet Quitting? Various economic and social factors have long shaped how employees and employers interact in labor markets. Labor supply, which summarizes workers' behavior in any labor market, reflects the labor inputs workers are willing to supply given the wage rate, non-labor income, and other individual attributes (Blundell & MaCurdy, 1999). Quiet quitting will negatively impact labor supply, triggering a gap between visible work and latent-effective work that contributes to actual output. This misalignment between the amount of apparently supplied and the latent - effective- labor supplied might be most pronounced in salaried jobs, where pay stays the same regardless of daily effort. Therefore, even if the labor market seems in equilibrium, the hidden, latent supply triggers a gap between the potential and the actual contribution of labor. The gap between the apparent and the latent contributions represents the opportunity cost due to quiet quitting. Quiet quitting will thus impose opportunity costs to companies -the employers- when paying a worker with a lower actual contribution than what is visible. Accordingly, Cebula and Foley (2022) explored other situations in which individuals may minimize effort to achieve a target utility level, which can lead to labor shortages and inefficiencies in the labor market.

On the labor demand side, quiet firing will cause a leftward shift in the labor demand curve, showing less use of worker resources. Labor demand, which summarizes employers' behavior in any labor market, reflects the labor inputs employers are willing to demand given the wage rate, prices of alternative inputs, their output prices, and the expected output level. Quiet firing will negatively impact labor demand, triggering a gap between the visible assigned work and the latent-effective- work demanded. Therefore, even if the labor market seems in equilibrium, the hidden, latent demand triggers a gap between the potential and the actual contribution of labor. The gap between the apparent and the latent contributions represents the opportunity cost due to quiet firing. Quiet firing will thus impose opportunity costs to companies -the

employers- when paying a worker with a lower actual contribution than what can be required. Underusing labor through quiet firing can create waste, as the workforce is not fully used (e.g., overeducation), representing an opportunity cost for the employer (McGuinness, 2006; Tsang, 1987). Carlsson et al. (2021) portrayed the leftward shift in labor demand because of permanent shocks from the product demand side.

FIGURE 1
WHICH CAME FIRST, QUIET FIRING OR QUIET QUITTING? A STATE OF INFINITE REGRESS



Quiet firing and quitting can be added to the list of established causes of inefficient input allocations, which dampen production. Those established causes include but are not limited to market failures (Adamopoulos et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2022), technical inefficiencies (N'cho et al., 2019; Singbo & Lansink, 2010), structural issues (Cotti & Drewianka, 2007; Xu et al., 2006), policy constraints (Chavas et al., 2005; Perera-Tallo, 2024), and behavioral factors (Christopoulos et al., 2021; Estevan & Baland, 2007). Nevertheless, we believe that contemporary workplace trends such as "quiet quitting" and "quiet firing" should be considered as additional behavioral factors apt to lead to inefficient labor allocations and negatively impact production. These *prima facie* causes of inefficient labor allocations reduce the amount of labor inputs contributing to actual outputs. They can further diminish employee motivation, morale, and alignment with organizational goals, negatively affecting the work environment.

Quiet firing and quitting can also be perceived as principal-agent problems, which arise when one party (the principal) delegates work to another party (the agent), who performs that work on behalf of the principal. Accordingly, when the agent (employees) has more information about their effort level and

capabilities than the principal (employer), moral hazard can occur where the agent may not exert the optimal level of effort because their actions (e.g., quiet quitting) are not perfectly observable by the principal. This case of information asymmetry could also be applied, without loss of generality, to quiet firing situations where the employee is the principal, and the employer is the agent. From the principal-agent problem perspective, numerous solutions have been proposed to mitigate potential adverse effects of principal-agent problems. These solutions include but are not limited to, incentives and cooperation between agents and principals and within teams of agents (Miller, 2005).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The debate over the precedence of Quiet Quitting versus Quiet Firing continues, yet the detrimental impacts of both on productivity and key organizational outcomes—such as alignment with goals, mission, values, and customer satisfaction—are indisputable. These behaviors diminish employees' contributions to organizational performance and the intended impact on both customers and the broader community served. Given that these phenomena are difficult to quantify and substantiate, it is essential to rigorously analyze and determine not only the necessary workforce levels but also the quality of performance among employees.

Literature indicates a critical need for preemptive measures to address the adverse effects of Quiet Quitting and Quiet Firing on organizational health. Existing research illustrates that these behaviors negatively affect employee engagement, productivity, and workplace culture (Campton et al., 2023; Ellis & Yang, 2022). Consequently, the following recommendations underscore the importance of cultivating an inclusive and supportive work environment that actively engages employees, alongside the need for research to develop early indicators of disengagement and quiet firing tendencies.

First Recommendation

Empirical evidence links employee satisfaction to enhanced engagement and retention (Detert, 2023; Sull & Sull, 2022). As such, it is imperative for organizations to prioritize policies and initiatives that cultivate employee happiness and motivation. Foundational theories of employee engagement, such as those proposed by Kahn (1990) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990), suggest that an employee's sense of purpose and immersion in their work correlates with higher contributions and productivity. Research suggests that by fostering an environment in which employees feel valued, involved, and fairly compensated, organizations can boost productivity and strengthen employee commitment, thereby reducing the likelihood of disengagement behaviors such as Quiet Quitting (Klotz & Bolino, 2022; Serenko, 2024). Therefore, fostering a culture that prioritizes employee well-being is not only ethically sound but also strategically beneficial for maximizing organizational potential.

Second Recommendation

The covert nature of Quiet Quitting and Quiet Firing, compounded by the reluctance of parties to disclose these behaviors, highlights a pressing need for continued research and the development of diagnostic tools for early detection. Insights from conflict management literature emphasize the importance of addressing conflicts and disengagement promptly to prevent negative ripple effects across teams and departments (Serenko, 2024; Zhyvko et al., 2024). Future studies should therefore focus on identifying measurable indicators of Quiet Quitting and Quiet Firing, allowing managers to proactively address underlying issues before they escalate. Communication audits and third-party-intervention might be the only solution in some cases to break the stalemate—the infinite regress of Quiet Quitting and Quiet Firing once engaged.

Third Recommendation

Because managers work for owners and employees work for managers, it is crucial that managers break the cycle when possible. The downward spiral of Quiet Quitting and Quiet Firing cannot be good for the organizational goals. Additionally, research should aim to refine strategies that encourage open

communication, equitable treatment, and constructive feedback, supporting a transparent and trust-based workplace culture (Kumar, 2016; Schein & Schein, 2016). A communication audit is key. Table 2 is language from Chapter 6 of *Managerial Communication for Professional Development* by Bell & Martin (2019). They outline the essential communication audit process steps, with benchmarks and industry practices.

TABLE 2
COMMUNICATION AUDIT METHODS, RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY MEASURES

Selecting Audit Methods (pp. 106-107)	Reliable and Valid Measures (pp. 107-108)
<p>The communication audit is a way of gathering data to analyze the communication that takes place within the firm. It provides the management with insight as to what is actually happening, rather than what they think is happening, during communications.</p> <p>Obviously, the audit process should reflect the needs of the particular firm. Instruments should be worded to fit the terminology used in the organization, and questions should be included that reflect the position of particular internal groups, including that of international and virtual members.</p> <p>A company must gather useful information that will help improve internal communications. Once the parameters of the audit have been determined, it is possible to select the correct audit activities and determine who should conduct the communication audit. Should internal or external people do the audit? Though internal entities know the organization best, employees may share information more truthfully with outsiders. Data gathering options must be considered for collecting the most accurate information—questionnaire, interviews, communication logs, and such. Employees will need the assurance that all information collected will be confidential, and sometimes this is easier done with external auditors. Careful interpretations and presentation of the findings by the researchers is essential so that managers can weigh the results properly. Management should be engaged in the process and willing to make changes that are indicated in the audit. If management is not willing to act on the data, then there is no reason to collect it (Bell & Martin, 2019).</p>	<p>Communication audits must measure accurately the multidimensional aspects of the constructs under study. A construct is an attribute of a person that often cannot be measured directly, but which can be assessed using a number of indicators or variables. Constructs will have one or more dimensions or component parts. For example, if you are conducting a communication audit and wish to measure the managerial listening skills practiced within an organization, measuring whether managers engage in good or bad listening behaviors would be a hidden, or latent, variable with two dimensions. A manager's ability to listen well would naturally be the hidden variable of the listening construct. You cannot directly observe whether the listening taking place in the head of the manager is good or bad; therefore, the best way to understand good and bad managerial listening practices is for you to develop a reliable and valid questionnaire.</p> <p>A reliable measure is one that is trustworthy and consistent, and does not show inconsistent degrees or magnitudes with each application—an inch is always an inch regardless of what is being measured. A measure that is valid measures what it is purported (designed) to measure. It would not be valid to measure social drinking, for example, with a questionnaire that you designed specifically to measure recreational drug use. Therefore, communication audits must measure multidimensional constructs accurately (Bell & Martin, 2019).</p>

These three recommendations are supported by the broader academic consensus on the negative impacts of toxic workplace cultures and disengagement, which can lead to significant opportunity costs and reduced organizational performance (Cebula & Foley, 2022; Priesemuth, 2020). By implementing proactive

engagement strategies and conducting empirical research on early detection methods, organizations can address the root causes of disengagement, fostering a culture that aligns employee well-being with organizational objectives.

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