

Burnout And Retention: Ask The Question

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The Great Resignation is upon us, and along with the dynamically shifting corporate landscape, it is leaving leaders somewhat lost. With the goal of understanding what smart business leaders are doing well (and where they are missing the mark), Dr. Deborah Gilboa and I spoke with 200 business leaders, thought leaders, academics and industry experts, about burnout and retention.

[Deborah Gilboa, MD is a world-renowned resilience expert](#), and I am not a bumpkin when it comes to teaching leaders how to implement Business Improv® techniques for personal, professional and culture development. Our research began in March 2021, when the vaccine came into use for the general population, and what we found centers on questions. (*This is the second article in a three-part series.*)

Bob Kulhan: Dr. G, what's a major drawback to replacing employees?

Dr. Deborah Gilboa: The cost to companies in replacing employees is clear. It's a time and resource drain.

Kulhan: So, if leaders are not investing the resources now, before employees leave, then they run the risk of spending even more time, energy, money – resources – replacing employees who quit from being burned out.

Of the 200 leaders we spoke with, it seems many leaders are looking for the fast solution. They're just looking to suppress the problem – not looking to solve the problem. *"We'll just put some lipstick on this pig and call it a day."*

Dr. G: I understand why leaders feel overwhelmed, why they want a simple answer. And it can be simple, even though it isn't easy. First of all, have the family fun day if you'd like. There's value in that because all these employees have families who've watched them work really hard, in a way they've never seen it before. They had to live with their Zoom calls, and piles of work in the living room so if now they get to live with their day at the amusement park that can be lovely. But that's about a *family* engagement which is an annual one-off. That does not solve the problem. There are initiatives that I have seen people putting in place that help more than a single fun day with the family.

For example, I'm a big fan of mindfulness, and this can be simple *and* easy to implement. Leaders block out five minutes at the beginning of the meeting for Mindfulness Monday, or simply give an opportunity to give an authentic answer to, *"Tell me how you're doing."*

Kulhan: Re-introducing the informal social aspect of work.

Dr. G: Right, and that check-in is again, a good start, low hanging fruit, but it's not going to drive change on its own. It's going to last only until the next frustrating email.

Kulhan: Absolutely. Behavior change comes from consistency over time, and with that consistency comes the connection, vulnerability, and empathy. Listening to what your employees – your team – is actually saying is powerful, and if they are saying, “*You know what would help my long-term mental health? If we had another one-off social!*”, okay, great – go to the waterpark or cornhole it up! Otherwise, taking a bit of time to listen to the people around you can go a longer way.

Dr. G: So, the first step is the hardest: it's a needs assessment. And that can be scary.

Kulhan: Well, that's because you have to actually put time and energy into it.

Dr. G: And because of an underlying fear: Most folks don't ask the questions because they don't think they want to know the answers.

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- Dr. G.

Kulhan: Yeah. That's it. You and I are going toward the same thing. At some point, you're actually going to have to care. That's why it's hard.

Dr. G: Because if you ask and you don't do anything about it, then you're going to have the opposite effect.

Kulhan: The conversation will look insincere, which will likely jeopardize your relationship.

Dr. G: In medicine we always say, “*Don't do a test unless you're going to do something with the result.*” If you ask and do nothing for months, then it's a strike against you. If you ask and you do something, it's a mark in your favor.

Kulhan: Action is key. However, *this is still new for us all*, which means we must give ourselves time to learn. I think a key part of this is transparent communication from leadership.

Dr. G: Yes, if you ask for information and then you report what you learned, people will absolutely forgive you if you don't find the right solutions immediately. You don't have to report every single comment; you don't have to repeat everything you heard. But you must accurately report the majority of what you learned, and then make an action plan.

When you want to help people be more resilient, when you want to strengthen them, there are four strategies that work. These can be used in any combination, and they are

- Empathy
- Transparently sourced information
- Processing time
- Autonomy

Asking does not have to mean hiring a company to come in and spend six months in discovery to create a survey to then ask. It could absolutely be a five question Survey Monkey survey.

Kulhan: You said it before, it doesn't have to be complex to be effective. It can be simple and still be effective.

Dr. G: Right. I know that it's not easy, but it can be simple.

Kulhan: So, let's start with a learner's mindset. In Business Improv we say, "*Postpone Judgment.*" Simple communication with the goal of learning – understand steps for retention and combating The Great Resignation. Then adapt-adapt-adapt!

Dr. G: Adapting is essential. It's about creating whatever works, given your industry, your mission and your business. It's different in my healthcare practice than it is in a graphic design firm, for example. What employees need now is different from organization to organization; it may also depend on what region of the country your people are in, and what the virus does, and what climate weather change does – nobody really talked about how people in Oregon, Idaho, California, couldn't go to work because of the fires. Life's challenges are not so binary as we pretend, they are with our Covid lens.

Kulhan: So, the first challenge we're talking about is design. Honoring where people work, when they work, how they work and the unique challenges that everyone faces with work, period.

Dr. G: Yes. Agreed.

Kulhan: And the second challenge is helping people, supporting people. Whether it is onsite, virtual, hybrid, whether it is bringing back to the office or dealing with climate, and fires, or the next variant. This is how we keep people.

Dr. G: If you don't help people stay with you, the secret everybody knows is that they can go work somewhere else. And employees understand that more now, in ways that they didn't believe it two years ago.

Dr. Gilboa and I had 200 conversations with 200 leaders, and what we discovered is that a few of the answers to the riddle around retention and The Great Resignation are rooted in our conversations around communication. Leaders need to be genuinely curious. Ask questions. Ask uncomfortable questions, learn to manage your own discomfort – use the Business Improv trick and postpone judgment. Ask the real meaty questions, ask the tough questions, then evaluate what you've learned and transparently share some of it. Take time to consider what initiatives you might put out there to try and improve things. Don't simply say, *"We're going to solve this all with an ice cream truck and cornhole."* Solve this with empathy, transparent information, processing time, and autonomy.

If a leader does not understand the challenges of those s/he leads, and where their employees' safe zone is, or where they can really streamline and find momentum on their own, then the leader doesn't understand where her/his employees are working, when they're working, and very importantly *how* they're working.

The conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.