Have you 'checked out' at work but forgot to tell anyone?

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Is it possible that you have 'checked out' from your job and just not told anyone yet? Is it hard to get up in the morning and get to the office? Do you feel just plain worn out on Friday afternoon? Has the fun somehow seeped out from the work you used to love to do? Are they days when you feel like you are just going through the motions and your heart's not really into your work? How about your employees? If we start to dig into the current, post-Q4-Financial Crisis working environment and examine the situation regarding employee engagement, it could make us start to worry that our workforce have turned into the walking dead, corporate zombies. Let me explain…

Just last year, for the very first time, the ILO-International Labour Organisation (a specialized organization within the United Nations that deals with international labour issues) included 'mental and behavioural disorders' in their new list of work-caused diseases. It hadn't been considered in the past. The focus has turned to the real dangers of increased stress in the workplace and they are taking it very seriously. It wasn't just the most recent financial crisis that has sent many workers scrambling for Prozac and Xanax in order to cope with increased workloads and internal pressures at work. The very nature of today's fast-paced, on call 24-hours-aday mentality, puts pressure on workers to constantly do more with less. Turbulent has become the new calm. The workforce is nervous and fearful of losing their jobs so they hide or mask their tension from co-workers, superiors and sometimes even their families. In some cases, they have already 'check out' mentally but still look like they are having a good time. Some become a shell of their former high-performing selves.

In addition to the mental stress, it has been proven that mental stress and emotional exhaustion can cause very real physical problems such as hypertension, Diabetes-Type-2 and even musculoskeletal disorders such as arthritis and neuralgia. The thing is that workers sometimes don't see these diseases as directly related to their work-related stress. They just seek treatment for the disease and keep working at the same pace and in the same way.

The last time it was measured, in 2005, stress in the workplace directly affected 22% of all workers in the EU (ILO statistics), representing the second highest form of on-the-job illness back then. We can only imagine what the percentage must be today, considering downsizing, layoffs, bankruptcies and the like that were caused by the financial avalanche in Q4 2008!

Let's be practical and consider the issues of workplace 'check out'…most of your workers simply aren't going to tell you when they've mentally and emotionally 'checked out'. Showing weakness, of any kind, in today's business environment, can be paramount to career suicide. It's the upwardly mobile that become the most vulnerable. It's logical. They keep pushing themselves to do more with less and to contribute their best possible work so they will get promoted. The more demanding the environment becomes, the harder they work. In this kind of corporate culture, interpersonal relationships often suffer as well. People tend to isolate, for fear that someone will see a weakness in them, discover a mistake or perhaps even take their job. The emotional exhaustion can definitely take its toll. In fact, you probably won't even know until this high potential individual hands you her resignation to go work for your competitor because the grass looks greener over there. You probably won't have a clue until your top-performer's wife calls you from the hospital that he's just had a heart attack. It's natural. The human body simply shuts down when it's overwhelmed. They have probably been working on autopilot for some time before they leave or fall ill.

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When the work environment becomes overwhelming, people have to mentally 'check out' to protect their own mental health. They go through the motions, scraping by but you never really know because they don't want you to know… until they are ready to make their move.

'Check out' is increasing in the workplace…we know that. It costs organizations huge sums of money to deal with the havoc caused by it. 'Checked out' workers don't pay much attention to customer satisfaction so your losing revenue that way. Checked out leaders don't inspire or engage employees so performance goes down. Checked out workers get sick more often and are responsible for a big percentage of long-term disability cases in Europe. The more 'checked out' workers you have, the more you will see the quality of work decrease, innovation come to a standstill and your corporate image being tarnished.

One other bit of enlightening news: It's the best employees who leave once they start to 'check out' because they can find jobs at your competitors' organisations. The less productive employees will stick with you, living in their zombie state, because they haven't the confidence or the credentials to find another job. You probably won't even notice that they've checked out because they will still show up for work most days.

Here are the facts: "One in six working men and woman suffers from burnout or depression, while one in three has hypertension or coronary artery disease. Some studies estimate that job strain alone accounts for at least 70% of burnout and 30% of hypertension among working people." (ILO 2010)

"Check out" is a very real organizational risk and its high time that organizations start putting risk control measures in place.

So, if we understand the organizational risk of employee 'check out' and even their eventual 'burnout', what can we do about it? What kind of business environment do we need to build so that our high performers are filled with energy rather than being drained dry?

Source

International Labour Organization [Online] information can be found at: http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/press-and-media-centre/insight/WCMS_126391/lang–en/index.htm