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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Unexpected Heroes: How People in Addiction Recovery can Help Solve the Crisis of the Great Resignation**

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**| ABSTRACT**

The Great Resignation has left many businesses searching for answers to help stabilize a dramatic loss in their workforce. This downward trend is resulting in increased turnover rates, loss of valuable institutional knowledge and threatens to diminish overall operational effectiveness. This article assesses how people in recovery from substance use disorder can help stabilize and strengthen workplace cultures and empower organizations to advance forward in a more cohesive, effective, and sustainable way. People in recovery from addiction often demonstrate high levels of gratitude and resiliency, which result in increased loyalty and commitment to employers. This phenomenon can not only lower employee turnover but also create a workplace culture that is appreciative, supportive, and collaborative. Employers can respond positively to the Great Resignation by hiring transformational and authentic leaders that are in recovery. This approach would not only help improve turnover rates but also cultivate a workplace culture that can thrive in times of uncertainty.

**| KEYWORDS**

Transformational Leadership, Authentic Leadership, Substance Use Disorder, Addiction, The Great Resignation, Gratitude, Resiliency, Recovery

**| ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**ACCEPTED:** 25 August 2022

**PUBLISHED:** 27 August 2022

**DOI:** 10.32996/jbms.2022.4.3.12

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### **1. Introduction – The Great Resignation**

Since March 2021, 48 million people have quit their jobs, and 55% of the current workforce plans on looking for employment opportunities elsewhere (BLS, 2022). The Covid pandemic has undoubtedly impacted life in various contexts, but probably none more noticeable than in the current labor market. With unprecedented departures and alarming turnover rates, employers must look at innovative approaches to workforce recruitment and retention. This phenomenon has been termed ‘The Great Resignation’ (Cohen, 2021), and it threatens to permanently change the way we do business.

Before we begin assessing how this exodus of talent can be stopped, it is important to first consider how we got here. The top issue, according to research (D. Sull, C. Sull, & Zweig, 2022), is toxic corporate culture. These toxic cultures are marked by failure to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, workers feeling disrespected, and unethical behavior (Sull, Sull, & Zweig, 2022). The pandemic has effectively lowered tolerance for such environments as employees now have more options for work and have prioritized mental and emotional health above other considerations (Bunger, Choi, MacDowell, & Gregoire, 2021).

The second highest driving force behind the Great Resignation is job insecurity and reorganization (Sull, Sull, & Zweig, 2022). When a company is struggling, managers typically first look to layoffs and restructurings to improve performance. This reactionary response creates a workplace culture that is fear-based and dualistic. Employees perceive their supervisors as overlords who must be appeased, and supervisors view their employees as a means to an end. This further amplifies the toxicity of the culture, and people are jumping ship because of it.

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A third factor that contributes to the Great Resignation is the failure to recognize performance (Sull, Sull, & Zweig, 2022). Companies that fail to recognize contributions, performance, and achievements often have higher rates of attrition and foster a demoralized climate (Chambers & Honeycutt, 2009). Recognition is not restricted to financial incentivization either, as lack of communication from the executive level relays the message that employees don't matter. All these factors are included in what is now being considered one of the direst workforce crises of the last decade. Figure 1 depicts the percentage of monthly resignations in the United States from January 2020 through December 2021.



**Source:** The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2021)

**2. What needs to change**

Many of the contributing factors to the Great Resignation could be eliminated with a change in organizational structure and philosophy. The practice of making important decisions between just a small group of upper-level executives without including those impacted by such decisions in the process triggers massive amounts of distrust and anxiety in the workplace. So, the first step corporations could take in dissuading their talent from leaving is to start including their perspectives in the discussion. The closed meetings create a power distance between executives and their followers. This approach may have been effective up until now, but society is becoming more aware of illusory tactics that damage trust and respect within the organization. Communication must be paramount at all levels for the workplace to be healthy and supportive.

Next, the relational bonds between employees need to be strengthened through trust, accountability, and understanding. The pandemic forced many employees to work remotely, which may have damaged group identity and cohesion in most companies. This unsettling identity increases the attractiveness of retiring early or moving to another company to avoid the reintegration process with the same employer. People are choosing the path of least resistance since there are now more career options, and the fear of the unknown, which kept employees with the same employer for years, has been largely eliminated through global experiences over the past two years. Corporations now must consider how they can strengthen the sense of belonging and community within their organizations to retain talent.

**3. How People in Recovery can Help**

People in recovery from addiction often possess characteristics that are synonymous with authentic and transformative leaders (Roop, 2022). Among the top traits which are shared between people with substance use disorder and effective leaders are authenticity, resiliency, tenacity, empathy, creativity, and self-awareness. These traits can help transform toxic workplace cultures

into environments that are supportive, creative, and harmonious. This will result in lower turnover rates and help talent acquisition and retention efforts.

A recent study (Roop, 2022) examined the leadership traits found in people with substance use disorder. The findings of the study revealed people in recovery from addiction are transformative and authentic leaders. Leadership isn't constrained to executive or managerial roles but extends to include any interaction between two or more people. Table 3.1 depicts the 8 combined dimensions of Authentic Leadership Theory (George, 2003) and Transformational Leadership Theory (Burns, 2004) and the correlating traits found in people who have faced substance use disorder and recovery.

**Table 3.1**

<b>Authentic and Transformational Leadership Dimensions</b>	<b>Associated Traits of Individuals with Substance Use Disorder</b>
Self-Awareness	Gratitude, Humility, Adaptability, Authenticity, Spirituality
Internalized Moral Perspective	Gratitude, Humility, Spirituality
Balanced Processing	Humility, Adaptability
Relational Transparency	Gratitude, Humility, Spirituality
Idealized Influence	Goal-Oriented, Resilience, Persistence, Humility, Determination
Inspirational Motivation	Resilience, Persistence, Humility, Determination, Spirituality
Intellectual Stimulation	Goal-Oriented, Adaptability
Individualized Consideration	Gratitude, Humility, Spirituality

**3.1 – Authenticity**

The unfortunate pattern of toxic workplaces is created through passive aggressive managerial styles, distrust, and false perceptions of performance (Gbadamosi & Osuagwu, 2007). Additionally, the numerous ethical failures of political, religious, and business leaders have led to a society that seeks consistency in words and actions. The result is a climate in which authentic leadership excels due to greater levels of trust and followership amongst team members. Authentic leaders are open to criticism and do not hide behind false self-images. People tend to be more responsive and agreeable to authentic leaders, and such an approach will earn the trust and dedication of employees.

People in recovery from addiction are marked by authenticity since it is vital to their recovery journey. According to a recent study on the traits found in people in recovery from addiction (Roop, 2022), authenticity emerged as the number one characteristic which describes their leadership style. Leaders and fellow employees who are authentic, honest, and transparent can transform workplace cultures that have become toxic through inauthenticity, deceit, and manipulation; when workplace cultures consist of people who practice rigorous authenticity, the morale and trust within the organization increase, resulting in lower turnover and longer tenures of employment.

**3.2 – Resiliency**

The pandemic brought about a significant number of changes to everyday life, including changes in the workplace environment. People were forced to work remotely, which introduced periods of social isolation and detachment. This led to disruptive outcomes, which had both good and bad consequences. Some people enjoyed the time at home and either retired post-pandemic or found employment that allowed them to work remotely fulltime. Still, the volatility of the pandemic and the unknown futures of corporations have led many employees to reconsider their priorities and either retire or change jobs.

For people in recovery, disruption and sudden shifts, in reality, are nothing new. The journey through addiction has served as a training ground for the development of resiliency and persistence. People in recovery are tenacious because they have experienced unexpected setbacks and failures yet keep getting back up and moving forward. Having these people as part of an organization will transform the culture into one which thrives in times of adversity. This will result in a lower turnover ratio and create a more stabilized workplace environment that is able to maintain cohesion through sudden changes in organizational and global landscapes.

**3.3 – Gratitude**

Gratitude is often overlooked quality in the workplace but is directly associated with longer periods of employment with one company (Ng, 2016). Gratitude is defined as the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself (Sansone R., & Sansone, L. 2010) and is closely associated with humility. Organizations which have leadership marked by gratitude and humility are often

more stable, supportive and promote a greater sense of well-being (Burton, 2020). These organizations experience lower turnover when compared to those with toxic environments and, as a result, retain their competitive advantage in personnel.

People in recovery from addiction are typically known as being grateful and humble. They develop loyalties to their employers based upon their gratitude for being given the opportunity to move beyond their past struggles in addiction. This establishes strong bonds of commitment to the organization and carries over to other team members, leading the entire workplace culture to reflect a deep sense of appreciation and respect. This dispels the development of toxicity in the workplace and leads to lasting commitments from employees, increased morale throughout the organization, and a positive outlook for the future, which can serve to attract new talent.

#### **4. Recommendations**

Responding to the Great Resignation will require change on two fronts. *First, companies should consider hiring people in recovery from addiction to fill positions at all levels, including the executive level.* Change and uncertainty will always be part of the world of business, and having employees who are grateful and resilient will help maintain stability during volatile times. Gratitude and resiliency are the hallmarks of recovery, branding those on this journey with characteristics that empower them for authentic and transformative leadership. Leaders are not limited to managerial roles or position titles, but anyone that influences others can be identified as a leader. People in recovery have cultivated powerful leadership tools throughout their journey, and having them on your team during times of crisis and uncertainty will result in a more stable environment which leads to greater stability, adaptability, and better performance.

*Second, companies should consider placing people in recovery into executive and managerial leadership positions.* At the core of the problem, what we are experiencing in the Great Resignation is a toxic workplace culture that ignores achievements and punishes authenticity. By appointing leaders who are open and vulnerable about their weaknesses, that inspire others through their personal interaction, and challenge their teams to achieve more through collaboration, the problem of workplace toxicity will dissolve. We are experiencing a societal progression in how power is understood. Distance between supervisor and employee has been a tactic to safeguard authority and power in organizations, but that strategy is becoming ineffective. True power is that which is shared. Authentic and transformative leaders are not afraid to share power because they know it can never be possessed or owned in the first place. This wisdom can be brought about through various life events and learning development techniques, but the journey through addiction and recovery can expedite the process. Placing people in recovery into leadership positions in organizations will transform morale through a renewed sense of identity, dedication, commitment, and respect.

*Finally, adopting the principles of recovery in an organization will help prevent the next Great Resignation.* Addiction has become so rampant that it affects nearly every family in America, and while we are all too familiar with the destruction it brings, it can also offer some important truths. The growth that occurs during the journey from addiction to recovery can be highlighted and integrated into corporate leadership programs. Valuable leadership traits such as persistence, honesty, empathy, humility, and accountability should become part of the curriculum for training leaders in corporate America. This will lead to organizations with authentic workplace cultures that are embedded with creative potential, thoughtfulness, and grit.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The Great Resignation reveals to us something about human nature. When we are faced with rapid uncertainty, we look to our leaders to be open and transparent with us during those times. The collective consciousness of society has grown beyond the point of being placated with the simple understanding that those in charge know what they're doing, and because of that, all is going to be okay. Relational leadership is needed, which is less interested in maintaining a know-it-all illusion and more interested in the process of discovery. This process may include some errors along the way, but the interaction between leadership, management, and team members will deliver greater group cohesion and transform the workplace culture. This will then serve to prevent the next great mass exodus because employees will feel appreciated and valued by the organization.

There are some limitations to this approach which include the necessary skills training to fulfill the duties of employment. While the interactions between the person in recovery and team members result in many positive outcomes, there still needs to be a level of competency required from the person in recovery to satisfactorily complete daily tasks. This article takes the view that considers those capabilities as already being in place. Additionally, future research could examine how people in recovery process adversity differently than those not in recovery. This understanding can help develop corporate training programs which are focused on how to best respond to difficulty and uncertainty within the organization.

The solution to our current dilemma may seem risky since it includes giving opportunities to those that have a past with substance use disorder. But that history should not be perceived as merely a disadvantage. Addiction can offer some of the most valuable leadership lessons in life. The tenacity it takes to overcome, the refusal to never give up, and the awareness of the

interconnectedness of all things empower those in recovery to not back down from any challenge and collaborate with others for the common good. This results in a culture that is incredibly optimistic, resilient, and ready for the next challenge. The answer to the Great Resignation could solve more than a workforce crisis. It may transform your entire company.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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**Author Biography:** Dr. Jason Roop spent 17 years in active addiction and would ultimately become homeless before entering recovery in 2013. Since then, he has earned his masters of theology degree in 2018 and, in 2022, earned his Ph.D. in Management with a specialization in Leadership. Dr. Roop serves as Executive Director of the Technology Training Center and Adjunct Professor of Business at Campbellsville University. He was recently appointed to the Kentucky Opioid Abatement Commission by the KY Attorney General and served as a board member for Hometown Connect, a local nonprofit focused on making addiction treatment accessible for all. Dr. Roop's research interests focus on the positive qualities found in people with substance use disorder and how those in recovery can positively impact society. His work is changing how people view addiction through understanding the underlying traits, which provide a pathway to effective approaches to treatment.

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