



X-Factor Leadership

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Rahaf Harfoush

Younger Generations Are Fed Up With The Way Workers Have Been Treated



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Rahaf Harfoush, executive director of [Red Thread](#), a think tank and special projects agency, shared smart insights with me and my colleague [Adam Bryant](#), managing director at [The ExCo Group](#).

Reimer: A narrative playing out in headlines now is that the pendulum is swinging back after the Great Resignation and [#quietquitting](#), and now employers have more leverage. What's your take?

Harfoush: A word I have been hearing a lot lately is polycrisis. We need to start looking at events not as simple

narratives, but as interconnected factors and movements of people and ideas and markets and data.

So on the one hand, the market is turning. Layoffs are rising. Obviously that is going to mean a shift in terms of what people are willing to demand in exchange for a job or job security. But what isn't going to change is the fundamental shift that was at the heart of "quiet quitting" in the first place.

It's not about whether people are ambitious. It's that they want to be respected, treated with dignity and valued for their work by their bosses. The younger generations are fed up with the way that workers have been treated, and they have made fundamental changes in the role that they want work to play in their lives.

Bryant: A big point of tension seems to be around what is considered reasonable expectations on both sides – what employers expect of employees and vice versa.

Harfoush: It's about the culture you create. Do you have a culture where your workers feel like the company has their best intentions at heart? Where managers and employees trust and respect each other? If there is a lack of trust and an assumption of ill will, then you've lost before you've even started.

I know that culture is such a big, nuanced term, but that is the fundamental issue. How are you managing? How are you reaching out to employees? How are you giving feedback? How are you using digital tools to build trust and collaboration? Part of the underlying push to get employees back to the office is that managers think it will be easier. The real problem is that there is a skillset gap for a higher level of management.

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We need to shift to a more explicit culture, rather than relying on people to pick up cues when they are in the office all day. You have to tell people now. You have to tell them about tone and etiquette and your expectations about being

present on Zoom calls. You have to tell people about expectations for productivity. You have to spell those out in a way that you didn't need to before, and that's like learning a new language.

Reimer: Historically, anybody who was ambitious and wanted to move up into a senior role had to have a lot of physical stamina, given the workload. Can that change? Is it simply the nature of these big jobs that there are fewer boundaries?

Harfoush: I think it's changing slowly. If you are a senior leader and you're a bit older, you've grown up in a time when professional identity was tied closely to a sense of self-worth and the kind of approval that that our society often rewards.

When I listen to conversations about purpose and work-life balance and what people want, they often comment that leaders in the C-suite are not part of those conversations. You have an entire generation of people who have grown up with a work story that looks very different from what younger people want or believe in.

The work story was that I'm going to work hard, struggle and sacrifice to prove my worth and work my way to the top. And the reward was that I'm going to be a C-suite executive, and I'm going to be admired, because in our society we admire them. We're very much about this workaholic culture.

What's happening, for a variety of reasons, including the cost of living crisis and the war and the pandemic, is that lot of young people are not seeing the returns on that sacrifice. It used to be that if you invested your time and made other sacrifices, it would lead to something.

Now we're asking people to do all of that and they're locked out of the housing market. I'm hearing a simmering discontent from a generational perspective in a way that I haven't heard in a very long time. Young people feel like their concerns are not being heard, the world is burning, and they're getting the short end of the stick.

If you were to then ask the question, "What does that mean if I'm the chief talent officer?" I would say, do you have an

accurate and unfiltered sense of what it's really like for people to work at your company? Do you know what people are saying about your company? Are you reading sub-Reddits like "anti-work" and "unionize America?" If you go online, you will see endless examples of real messages that people are getting from their managers. And you think to yourself, how could somebody in management send this communication to another human being?

Bryant: Why are there so many bad bosses? It's a persistent problem.

Harfoush: We give people these labels — boss and CEO, for example — and behind that is a human being who has had very specific experiences in their own life, including whether or not they felt respected, and how they like to communicate. So many of us go through our lives having inherited beliefs, behaviors, and expectations from our parents in a way that might not be serving our highest good, and so many of us never have the opportunity to go back and question it.

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There is that expression, "Hurt people hurt people," I think hurt people become bad managers. If you are somebody who has always expected that respect means complete obedience — because maybe that's what you experienced growing up and that's how you decide to manage — then it's going to be really hard for you to connect with people. People need to work on their ability to listen, to have empathy, and to be able to communicate effectively with people.

We as humans also have become so disconnected from our bodies. Our nervous systems have become completely dysregulated because of social media, the news, doom scrolling and the pandemic. Because of all that stress, we are in a constant state of fight or flight or freeze, and that leads to burnout.

And when you are in a state of burnout, you are less able to read people's micro-expressions. You are more likely to take someone's tone the wrong way. You are more likely to