



Episode 56: “Ridding Your Workplace of Quiet Quitting,” With Peter Rahbar

Speakers: Ari Kwiatkowski, Barclay Damon, and Peter Rahbar, the Rahbar Group

[Ari Kwiatkowski]: Hi, everyone, this is a *Barclay Damon Live* broadcast where we discuss all things L&E, labor and employment. I’m Ari. Let’s dig in.

[Ari]: Hi everyone, welcome to episode 56. This is “Ridding Your Workplace of Quiet Quitting,” a discussion with Peter Rahbar. I am thrilled to welcome Peter to the podcast today. And I think a lot of us listening have heard a lot about this concept of “quiet quitting.” It’s been in the *New York Times*, it’s been talked about a bunch. And Peter is here to kind of help us through it and talk to employers, management side people about what we can do to address it. So, Peter, thanks so much for joining.

[Peter]: Thanks for having me, Ari. It’s great to be here.

[Ari]: And Peter, would you mind just telling our listeners a little bit about your experience and particularly your workplace experience, and things like that? I think that will be helpful background for them as we kind of push through this topic today.

[Peter]: Sure, well, I’m a lawyer in New York City and my practice is predominantly working with executives as they enter and exit different jobs. But I also work with them a lot on workplace issues that they encounter on a day-to-day basis. And my background, I started as a lawyer at Proskauer here in New York in the Labor and Employment Group. And then I led the employment team at Hearst the media company for about 12 years before starting my own practice six years ago. So I like to think I bring a 360 perspective to my clients, and I know they appreciate that and we have great relationships as we, you know, tackle these issues that are present in the new workplace.

[Ari]: Absolutely, and we’re going to need that 360 perspective today for sure.

[Peter]: Great, well that’s why I’m here to bring it. So let’s dive into it.

[Ari]: Awesome. Yes. So, Peter, our listeners know that—and I do this, just so you know, to myself, if I even have a solo episode—I always ask our guests to just share something interesting, fun fact about themselves, personal or professional... doesn’t have to be either one, but I’m hoping you’re indulge me and just give our listeners a fun fact about you.

[Peter]: Well, I gave this one a lot of thought because I know, you know, I’ve listened to a lot of your podcasts. I know this is the big question, which could really determine. It could determine the whole course of the episode, of course. I would say my fun fact is, you know, I’m a big fan of Negronis, the beverage, the cocktail. And I like to...

[Ari]: Okay.

[Ari]: Do you like it Sbagliato or whatever? Yeah, just purist. Okay.

[Peter]: No, no, I have very strong opinions on how they should be prepared. And so I don't like the Spagliato. In fact, someone, a client sent me a picture of a coffee Negroni this morning. And I don't know if I'm going to be diving into that one.

[Ari]: Okay. I don't know how I feel about that.

[Peter]: But yeah, it's something that started over the pandemic, and I've like posted pictures of me drinking Negronis throughout the world and throughout New York City. It's something that's really stuck with me because everyone I know sort of sends me pictures of Negronis whenever they're drinking them. So it's a...

[Ari]: So I, well, I love that. So you're an encyclopedia of information as it relates to the Negroni. That's helpful for me to know. So this is a follow-up question, but now you have, you have me interested. I'm engaged. What, where is the best Negroni you've ever had?

[Peter]: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Great. Well, I sort of figured as a lawyer, you would ask that question after I told you what my... so I thought about that a lot too. And I would say the best one I had is at a hotel on the Amalfi coast in Italy in Positano called Le Sirenuse Hotel and there's a beautiful bar on the lower level that overlooks the sea and the whole town of Positano. It's beautiful, and they also happen to make a wonderful Negroni with a very important element, which is a designed orange peel, a very curved, almost like a spiral orange peel. But I guess part of it's the drink itself, but the setting can't be beat. So I'd say if you ever find yourself there, make sure you go and have that cocktail. The hotel itself is too expensive for most people to stay at.

[Ari]: Right.

[Peter]: ...but the cocktails are accessible to everybody. Yeah.

[Ari]: Sounds good. I was like, is this a White Lotus situation where now it costs like \$3,000 a night?

[Peter]: Yeah, yeah, it was like White Lotus before White Lotus. But if you're in New York, then go to Dante, which is in downtown New York, and they have the best Negronis.

[Ari]: Good to know. Next time I'm in New York I'm going to have to hit it up. But anyway, let's dig in. Peter, I feel like we could probably talk about traveling, Italy, Negronis for 30 minutes but unfortunately let's kind of...

[Peter]: It's a great way to "quiet quit" if you want to talk about travel instead of doing your job.

[Ari]: Yes, yes. Although not that we want to encourage that or maybe we do, you know, I don't know, whatever. But I'm kidding. But in any event, Peter, like I mentioned a few minutes ago, this is, I think, a kind of a hot topic right now. I think we've all heard a lot about it. And I actually, I think I was discussing it over the holiday weekend and it came up in some of my family conversations and some of my older family members in particular were like, well, what does that mean? So, Peter, I'm looking for you to kind of tell our listeners, what is this phenomenon of quiet quitting?

[Peter]: I have to be honest, it's something I talk a lot about, and it's something I also dread talking about, because quiet quitting is, to me at least, no more than this traditional debate that employees have had about their own work-life balance on their jobs. But there's certainly several factors that have been going on the last couple of years that have really, I think, brought this to the forefront and made it a real issue for discussion that, you know, everybody loves to name trends now so, you know, it got this name, it's stuck, and we've talked a lot about it. But, you know, I'd say right now what's fueling it... is certainly employees, most employees have worked really hard during the pandemic. As a lot of us know, there was basically no endpoint to work. No start work/end work. You were just always on. You were doing whatever you could to help the company get through the pandemic. People are tired, and they're worn out. That's one element of it is just people are really tired. I think there's a lot of mental health issues attached to this that if you're a smart company, you're really focused on that.

But unfortunately, mental health issues are really hard for employers to tackle in most cases. And then the other part of it that I think's really fueling the discussion is a lot of employees just don't feel appreciated, and they don't feel engagement anymore. And that's a real management issue that I think needs to be tackled is, how do you connect with and engage your employees so that they feel recognized, they feel a part of the team, and they are motivated to go and above and beyond. So there's a number of things contributing to this right now, but I think those are the main ones.

[Ari]: Got it. So Peter, I'm curious because I think as, as you know, I see a lot about it on social media, whether it's LinkedIn or Instagram or even TikTok, honestly. And I think that there's kind of this notion that this is something that affects mostly younger generations. So I'm a millennial, so I'll pick on myself, millennial or maybe the Gen Z generation in the workplace. And I'm just curious, you know, your thoughts on that and in your conversations with management, if that's been the case, or it's really just more of a global issue of, you know, due to the reasons you just mentioned.

[Peter]: Oh, I don't think that's the case at all. I mean, I think that's maybe the group that's more vocal about it or the younger sets of employees. I mean, let's be honest, they're more vocal and they're more willing to share work-related issues than the older generations in the workplace, whether it's sharing their salaries or sharing their promotion conversations or whatever it is. Sharing their frustrations definitely is something they would do. But I've seen it and I've talked with clients about it in older generations of workers as well. I mean, it's I think it's prevalent across the board because again, I think it's a problem of people being worn out, people not feeling engaged, you know, managers needing to figure out new ways to get their employees motivated. And, you know, as we're coming out of the crisis phase of the pandemic, you know, everything's changed in the workplace. And I think management style really needs to adapt to that and the new needs of employees.

[Ari]: Yeah, I think that's a really good point. I remember the days of the pandemic where, you know, I couldn't work from the office because, you know, we weren't deemed essential as lawyers or an essential business. And I just felt like I was working during the day and it was just bleeding into the evening, you know, it would be 9 p.m. and I'm like, why am I still working? Like, I guess it's because I have nothing else to do. I can't go anywhere. I don't, you know, so I think that's dead on. And I think, you know, I'm not sure about whether remote work has helped or contributed to quiet quitting, but I think it certainly is a good point to make that the demarcation between work and life outside of work is kind of blurred.

[Peter]: Yeah, I mean, it's a debate I remember having with my colleagues when I started at Proskauer back in the day. As you know, when you start out at a big law firm, you are expected to work a lot. And, you know, you're judged on the number of hours you bill in a particular year. So we would have talks about how we could address that. But remote working has made it particularly difficult. Not just because your day bleeds into the night, and you can all of a sudden put your computer down, and it's 8 o'clock at night, and you haven't moved. But also because communication is so important for keeping employees engaged. And for a lot of managers, not all, but for a lot, communicating and engaging remote workers is very difficult. And so, part of what we see on the management side is, well, the pandemic is over, just come back, everything go back to normal. And that's the expectation a lot of managers have, except nothing is normal, nothing is what it used to be. So why should work be the same? And they really need to adapt their engagement strategies with employees to keep them motivated. And right now employees want to feel recognized, they want to feel rewarded, whether it's financially or with a promotion or just even like a mention in a meeting. And they want to know what's going on. So, I speak a lot with clients about just communicating, over-communicating about good things, about bad things. I mean, the more touchpoints you have with an employee, the harder it is for them to check out and not feel engaged. But if you're just going with the old tried-and-true 2018 formula, you know, then I think you're going to, you're going to have a gap in engagement.

[Ari]: Right, I think that's a good point. So I think Peter, a lot of people perceive—whether it's right or wrong, and I think there's an element of truth to it—but a lot of people perceive quiet quitting as basically “I'm an employee and I'm doing the absolute bare minimum.” And I think that there's a bit of a conflict because if you're an employer, you don't necessarily want an employee doing just the bare minimum, but if you're the employee and

you're doing what's expected of you, at least at a minimal level, and nothing more. Why is that a problem? Or why should employers care about that?

[Peter]: Right. Yeah, I mean, a lot of the managers I talk to now, they just feel super stretched and tired. And they're all going above and beyond for a variety of different reasons. And they want to see that same level of commitment from the workers. The problem is that doesn't come naturally for people who are newer to an organization or maybe haven't been treated fairly or maybe haven't

[Ari]: Or aren't making six, seven figures.

[Peter]: Yeah, yeah, or aren't paid much or maybe they did work hard and that wasn't recognized by a promotion or other means. So I think managers really need to be careful about imposing their own values on workers. I mean, the reality is people who report to you have different priorities. And it's on you to figure out what they are. And any manager who has a one-size-fits-all type of approach, it's really, it's not going to work in 2023. It's just not, you know, I mean, employees, they have more access to information than ever. They feel more empowered than ever. You know, they talk to their co-workers about these things. So as a manager, you have to recognize that. And you have to adapt your style to really engage with the employees that you manage on a day-to-day basis.

[Ari]: Makes sense. So I think you've emphasized communication a lot, Peter, but can you give our listeners some tips or the best ways that you think can help with ridding a workplace of quiet quitting, or at least preventing it, if it's not happening right now?

[Peter]: Yeah, I think, well, communication is the centerpiece and trust, you know, and you build trust through communication and through sharing and through common experiences and interests. I think it's important to talk to employees about what your expectations are of them and really clearly lay those out and then also understand what their expectations are of you. And for some managers, that's a really uncomfortable conversation. They feel like it should only be one way. Why should they have any expectations of me? They should be happy to have a job, et cetera. But they do. So it's better for you to know them early on and understand what they are. And if they're unrealistic, address that. If they're realistic and positive, support that. And I think you should regularly schedule conversations, check-ins, these things are hard and time-consuming, but they're so important. And there's such an important way to not only keep your employees engaged, but give you an early sort of understanding of potential issues that may be in the pipeline and really deal with problems before they become big and messy, right? That's when the lawyers come in. So you want to, yeah

[Ari]: Yeah, you don't want us involved.

[Peter]: Exactly, exactly.

[Ari]: I think that's good advice, Peter. And I think, you know, you and I were talking about this offline before we started recording, but I think, you know, it can be difficult for employers, managers, because, you know, if somebody is not performing or is doing the bare minimum, particularly when they've been maybe an overachiever or been performing really well in the workplace, it's tough because you can't automatically assume that that person is quiet quitting, right? I mean, they could have a medical issue going on. They could have a slew of other issues. So, you know, it's tough because you want to you want to make sure you're communicating, but on the other hand an employee may not feel comfortable to some extent talking about those issues, but I think we have to put on our lawyer hats and, you know, tell everybody you shouldn't automatically assume that it's just quiet quitting. It could be other reasons, many of which are protected or potentially protected.

[Peter]: Right, and hopefully if you were having regular conversations with your employees, you're touching on these issues and you're figuring out what they are. And if you've laid out your expectations and they're not meeting them and you're telling them that, that's an opportunity for them to speak with you and say, well, X is going on. I'm trying to start a family and I'm really focused with that. I've been dealing with a difficult medical

issue, you know, I'm having a tough time, you know, with depression, you know, there's, sometimes those things will come out in conversations like this. And then, you know, good companies will have resources and, you know, professionals to help managers deal with those situations as they arise. Because, yeah, certainly like mental health right now is such a huge issue in the workplace. So few companies are equipped to deal with it, they don't want to deal with it, they think it's too dangerous or tricky. But there are ways to be proactive about that too and make sure, I mean one of the things I say to clients is like make sure it's not always all about work. There's some balance even within the workplace, whether it's social engagement or connection or wellness or other types of initiatives. Those are important ways to combat quiet quitting as well.

[Ari]: Yes, good point, Peter. So I think we're nearing the end of our time together before we sign off, any last words of wisdom or anything you think is super important that we haven't discussed for employers, managers to keep in mind in the context of this idea of this idea of quiet quitting.

[Peter]: Yeah, don't believe everything you see on TikTok. No, yeah, yeah. I mean, look, unfortunately, like with this issue and some others, there's a lot of like mockery around it. And, you know, there's a lot of dismissive reactions from managers, I've certainly encountered that. I mean, I've gone into meetings with clients where they say, no one cares about this place anymore. You know?

[Ari]: Yes, true. Right.

[Peter]: And to me, like, that's not something to be mocked. That's not something to be dealt with by firing everybody. To me, that says, like, you know, my first question is always, well, what are you doing to engage and understand what the real issues are? Are you surveying? Are you meeting regularly with people? Are you, you know, communicating your message? Are you having "all hands" meetings on regular bases? So, I, ...there's a tendency with a lot of managers to only want to have positive conversations and only share positive information. And I think, you know, in this day and age, like, you've got to tackle the difficult ones too. And your employees will appreciate that. And so I would say, you know, don't get caught up in the trends, really dig in and figure out what's going on at your company, have the difficult discussions, make the right decisions for your business without, you know, too much outside noise. And always call your lawyer. Always call your lawyer for advice on how to do that.

[Ari]: Yes. Yes, yes. Well, Peter, thank you so much. I think this was great. A lot of good information, a lot of good things for our listeners to keep in mind, you know, with this quiet quitting concept in the back of their heads as they communicate with employees and make employment decisions. So thanks again so much for joining today.

[Peter]: Thanks for having me. It was a lot of fun discussing this with you.

[Ari]: Yes, my pleasure. And to our listeners, for our next segment, we're going to try to demystify COBRA and some employee benefits-related issues. So you definitely don't want to miss that. Tune in. Thanks.

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