

THE 7 EARLY WARNING SIGNS YOUR BEST EMPLOYEE IS ABOUT TO LEAVE

How to recognise disengagement before it becomes resignation.



Matching, connecting and building,
careers, teams and businesses for long
term success and fulfilment.

TL;DR

If your best employee resigned tomorrow, what would the impact be?

In this guide, you'll learn:

- The five stages of the Disengagement Curve.
- The seven behavioural warning signs of disengagement.
- Why high-performing employees choose to leave.
- Practical questions to help managers have better retention conversations.
- When to focus on retention and when to begin succession planning.

The key takeaways in under 60 seconds:

- **Most employees don't leave because of one bad day.** They leave after months of unresolved frustrations.
- **Performance is a poor indicator of engagement.** Your best people often deliver until the day they resign.
- **Behaviour changes before performance does.** Watch for signs of withdrawal, fewer ideas and less future-focus.
- **Watch for patterns.** Leaders should pay attention to changing patterns.
- **Early intervention.** Once someone has started job hunting reengagement is more challenging (not impossible).
- **Proactivity matters.** Conversations should happen frequently, not just during performance reviews.
- **The goal isn't to keep everyone.** Ensure no valuable employee leaves because nobody recognised the signs.

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Most resignations begin long before they're announced.

When a valued employee resigns, it's easy to focus on the moment they hand in their notice. In reality, that decision has often been developing for weeks or even months.

Long before an employee updates their CV or accepts another opportunity, subtle changes in behaviour can signal that motivation is beginning to decline.

The challenge is that these changes are rarely dramatic. High performers often continue to deliver results while gradually becoming less connected to their role, their team and the wider organisation.

The most effective leaders don't wait until someone decides to leave.

They recognise these behavioural patterns early, ask better questions and create opportunities to understand what's changed before disengagement becomes departure.

This guide is designed to help you recognise those signals, so that retention becomes a proactive leadership decision rather than a reactive response.

The objective isn't to persuade every employee to stay.

The objective is to ensure your business is never caught by surprise.

The strongest organisations recognise talent risks early, have better conversations with their people and make proactive decisions about retention, succession planning and future hiring before they become costly business problems.

Recognising those risks isn't something that should happen once a year during a performance review.

It comes from regular, meaningful conversations that help leaders understand how people are really feeling before issues become resignation letters.

Early insight helps leaders decide when to re-engage and when to prepare for succession.



The Disengagement Curve

Why resignation is the final stage, not the starting point.

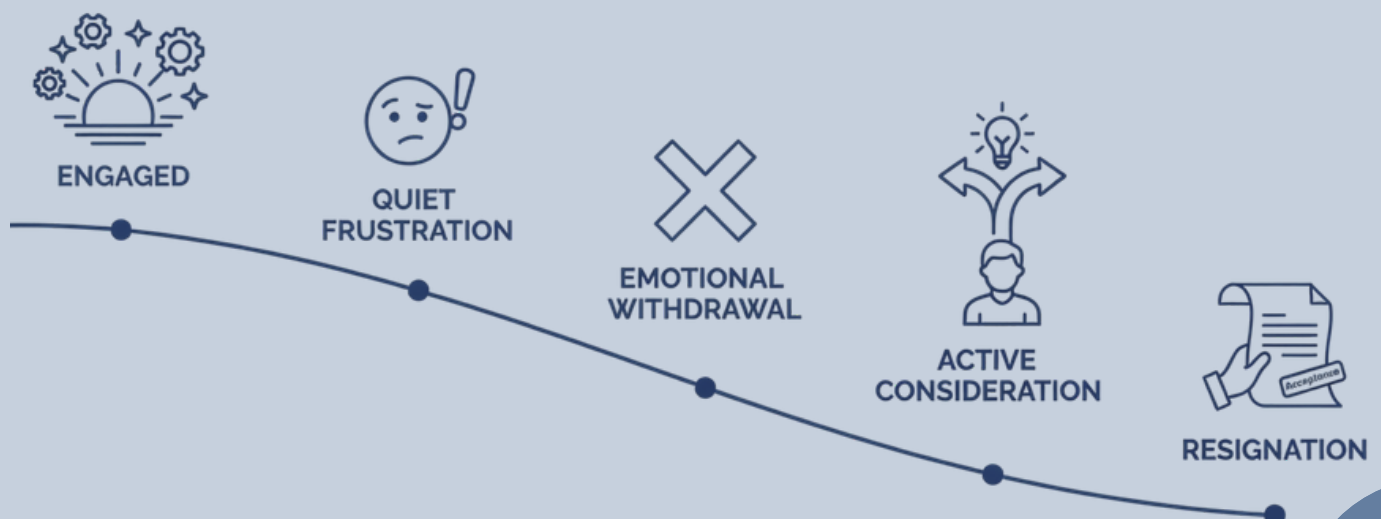
Most leaders experience a resignation as a surprise. For the employee, however, the decision has often been developing for weeks or even months.

Disengagement is rarely triggered by a single event. Instead, it is a gradual shift in how people think, feel and behave at work. The challenge is that performance often remains strong during the early stages, making the warning signs difficult to recognise.

Minor frustrations can gradually weaken an employee's connection when left unresolved.

By the time someone begins speaking to recruiters or actively exploring other opportunities, the decision is often well underway.

At Radial, we think of this progression as The Disengagement Curve.



The Disengagement Curve

Rather than moving directly from engagement to resignation, employees typically pass through a series of predictable stages.

Understanding where someone sits on the curve helps leaders recognise when there is still an opportunity to re-engage, develop or plan ahead.

The earlier these behaviours are identified, the more options a business has.

Sometimes that means retaining a valued employee.

Sometimes it means redesigning a role, strengthening the team around them or beginning succession planning before the business is placed under unnecessary pressure.

The key is recognising the warning signs early enough to make a proactive decision rather than reacting to an unexpected resignation.

Stage	Leader's opportunity
Engaged	Maintain momentum
Quiet Frustration	Listen and understand
Emotional Withdrawal	Reconnect and act
Active Consideration	Retain if the root cause can be addressed
Resignation	Learn and improve

The Disengagement Curve Stages

Stage 1: Engaged

Employees feel positively challenged, valued and connected to the organisation's goals. They contribute ideas, take ownership and see a future for themselves within the business.

Stage 2: Quiet Frustration

Something begins to change. It could be limited progression, increasing workload, inconsistent leadership or a feeling that their contribution is no longer recognised. Most employees at this stage are not looking to leave. They are looking for reasons to stay.

Stage 3: Emotional Withdrawal

Commitment begins to fade. Employees become less visible, contribute less during discussions and reduce the discretionary effort that once made them stand out. This is often the point where managers notice that "something feels different."

Stage 4: Active Consideration

The employee starts exploring alternatives. They may reconnect with former colleagues, respond to recruiters or quietly assess opportunities elsewhere. Once an employee starts exploring other opportunities, re-engagement often becomes more challenging.

Stage 5: Resignation

By the time notice is handed in, the decision is rarely made overnight. It is usually the conclusion of a journey that has been unfolding for some time.

The most effective leaders do not wait for Stage 5. They recognise the subtle behavioural changes that emerge much earlier and create opportunities to reconnect before disengagement becomes departure.

The First Four Warning Signs

Why resignation is the final stage, not the starting point.

The earliest warning signs are often subtle. On their own, they may not seem significant. Together, they can indicate that an employee's commitment to the organisation is beginning to decline.

A sustained change across several behaviours is more significant than any single incident

The key is to look for changes in behaviour, not isolated incidents.

Ask yourself:

"Is this out of character for this person?"



1. They stop contributing ideas

What you'll notice

The employee who once suggested improvements, challenged thinking or volunteered new ideas becomes noticeably quieter.

What it could mean

When people feel their opinions no longer matter, they often stop sharing them. This is frequently one of the earliest signs that discretionary effort is beginning to decline.

What to do

Ask for their perspective directly. Create space for honest feedback and demonstrate that their ideas genuinely influence decisions.

Try asking:

- "I've noticed you've been quieter than usual. Is there anything on your mind?"
- "You normally bring great ideas to these discussions. I'd really value your perspective."
- "Are there any barriers preventing you from contributing as much as you'd like?"



2. They withdraw from wider conversations

What you'll notice

They become increasingly focused on their own workload and participate less in cross-functional discussions, social interactions or wider business initiatives.

What it could mean

Employees who begin feeling disconnected often reduce their involvement to the minimum required. Their relationship with the organisation becomes more transactional than collaborative.

What to do

Explore whether they still feel connected to the organisation's direction and look for opportunities to involve them in wider business conversations again.

Questions to ask:

- "How connected do you feel to what's happening across the business?"
- "Do you still feel involved in the conversations that matter?"
- "Is there anything preventing you from contributing more broadly?"



3. They become passive in meetings

What you'll notice

They attend meetings but contribute less, ask fewer questions and rarely challenge ideas.

What it could mean

Silence isn't always agreement. It can indicate that someone no longer feels invested in the outcome or believes their contribution will make a difference.

What to do

Notice changes in participation, particularly from previously engaged employees, and follow up privately afterwards.

Try saying:

- "I noticed you were quieter than usual today. Was there anything you wanted to add?"
- "I'd be interested to hear your thoughts now we've had time to reflect."
- "Has anything changed in how you're feeling about the projects we're working on?"



4. They stop talking about the future

What you'll notice

Career conversations become shorter. Development discussions lose momentum. Long-term goals are replaced by a focus on immediate tasks.

What it could mean

People who see a future with an organisation usually enjoy talking about it. When those conversations disappear, it's worth understanding why.

What to do

Schedule a dedicated career conversation that focuses on aspirations rather than performance.

Topics to explore:

- Where do you see yourself over the next two years?
- What skills would you like to develop?
- Do you feel stretched and challenged in your current role?
- Is there anything preventing you from achieving your career goals here?
- What opportunities would you like to explore that we haven't discussed before?

Leadership Insight

No single behaviour confirms that someone is preparing to leave. What matters is the pattern.

When several of these behaviours appear together, particularly in someone who has previously been highly engaged, view them as an invitation to start a conversation rather than evidence to reach a conclusion.

The Final Three Warning Signs

The most significant changes are often the least obvious.

As employees move further along the Disengagement Curve, their behaviour becomes more predictable.

They are not necessarily performing poorly, but they are investing less of themselves in the organisation.

The following behaviours are often seen in the later stages of disengagement and should prompt a timely conversation.



5. They ask for less, not more

What you'll notice

An employee who once sought new challenges or greater responsibility now asks to step back. They may request fewer projects, reduced responsibilities or increased flexibility.

What it could mean

While there can be many genuine reasons for these requests, they can also signal that an employee is beginning to detach from their role. Instead of looking ahead, they are creating distance.

What to do

Approach the conversation with curiosity rather than assumption. Focus on understanding what's changed before considering solutions.

Try asking:

- "I've noticed you've been asking to step back recently. Has something changed?"
- "How are you feeling about your current workload and responsibilities?"
- "Does your role still give you the challenge you're looking for?"



6. They become difficult to motivate

What you'll notice

Recognition has less impact. New projects generate little enthusiasm and goals that once inspired them now receive only the minimum level of engagement.

What it could mean

Motivation often declines when people lose sight of purpose, growth or personal achievement. The issue is rarely effort alone. It is usually a reflection of how meaningful the work feels.

What to do

Reconnect the individual with what matters most to them. Explore whether their current work still plays to their strengths and supports their longer-term ambitions.

Try asking:

- "What aspects of your role are you enjoying most at the moment?"
- "Do you still feel challenged by your work?"
- "Is there anything you'd like to be doing more, or less, of?"



7. They start doing only what is expected

What you'll notice

The employee still performs well, meets deadlines and fulfils their responsibilities. What disappears is the initiative that once distinguished them. They stop volunteering ideas, solving problems proactively or looking beyond their immediate role.

What it could mean

This is often the clearest sign that discretionary effort has been replaced by compliance. The employee has not disengaged from the work itself. They have disengaged from the organisation.

What to do

Don't mistake consistent performance for sustained engagement. Explore whether they still feel invested in the business and whether they can see a future for themselves within it.

Try asking:

- "How are you feeling about your role compared with six months ago?"
- "Do you still feel you can make a real impact here?"
- "What would make this role more rewarding for you?"



Looking for Patterns, Not Problems.

Any one of these behaviours may have a perfectly reasonable explanation. Personal circumstances, workload or temporary pressures can all influence how someone shows up at work.

A sustained change across several behaviours is more significant than any single incident.

The real risk emerges when several behaviours appear together or when they represent a noticeable change for someone who was previously engaged and energised.

The most effective leaders don't wait for certainty before starting a conversation. They recognise that early, supportive dialogue is far more effective than trying to recover a resignation that has already been decided

Leadership Reflection

If you observed three or more of these behaviours in one of your highest performers, would you recognise them as a retention risk, or simply assume they were having a busy month?



Why High Performers Really Leave

Most people don't leave because of one bad day. They leave when frustrations remain unresolved.

When an employee resigns, it's tempting to focus on the immediate trigger. A better salary. A new opportunity. A difficult conversation.

In reality, these are often the final push rather than the root cause.

For many high performers, the decision to leave develops over time as their expectations of the role no longer match their experience. Understanding these drivers helps leaders address issues before they become resignations.

Growth

High performers want to keep learning. When development slows or career progression feels uncertain, motivation often begins to decline.

Leadership

People look to their managers for direction, feedback and support. When communication is inconsistent or trust weakens, engagement can quickly follow.

Recognition

Feeling valued is about more than praise. It's about knowing that effort is seen and that contributions make a difference.

Purpose

People are more engaged when they understand how their work contributes to something bigger. When that connection fades, so can their commitment.

Leadership Reflection

Before assuming why someone is disengaged, ask yourself:

- Have I spoken to them about their future recently?
- Do they feel recognised for their contribution?
- Are they still being challenged?
- Would they say their work feels meaningful?

The answers to these questions often reveal far more than an exit interview ever will.



The Retention Conversation

The right conversation at the right time can change the outcome.

Regular conversations about motivation and future ambitions can uncover what formal reviews may miss.

By the time an employee hands in their notice, it's often too late to understand what has changed.

The most effective leaders don't wait for an exit interview. They create regular opportunities for honest conversations before disengagement becomes resignation.

The objective isn't to convince someone to stay. It's to understand what's influencing their experience and identify where meaningful changes can be made.

Four Questions Every Manager Should Ask :

1. What's giving you the most energy at work right now?

This helps identify what motivates the individual and where they feel they are making the greatest contribution.

2. What's becoming more frustrating than it should be?

Encourage honest feedback without immediately trying to solve the problem. Listen first.

3. Do you feel you're continuing to grow here?

Development isn't always about promotion. It can also come from new challenges, greater responsibility or learning opportunities.

4. If you could change one thing about your role, what would it be?

This question often uncovers issues that employees haven't previously felt comfortable raising.

Before You Finish the Conversation

Ask yourself:

- ✓ Did I listen more than I spoke?
- ✓ Do I understand the issue, rather than assuming it?
- ✓ Have we agreed on at least one action?
- ✓ Have we scheduled time to review progress?

Retention is rarely achieved through a single conversation. It is built through trust, follow-through and consistent leadership.



One Final Question

If your best employee resigned tomorrow, what would the impact be?

Replacing a high performer is rarely as simple as filling a vacancy.

Knowledge leaves. Customer relationships are disrupted. Team morale can be affected. Momentum slows while recruitment, onboarding and development begin again.

The most effective organisations don't wait until someone resigns to think about retention.

They regularly assess where their greatest talent risks exist and have meaningful conversations before disengagement turns into departure.

The Replaceability Test

Think about the people in your organisation who would be hardest to replace.

Ask yourself:

- Would I recognise the early signs if they were becoming disengaged?
- Have I spoken to them recently about their future, not just their performance?
- Do they feel challenged, recognised and valued?
- If they resigned tomorrow, would I be surprised?

If the answer to the last question is yes, now is the time to start the conversation.

Succession Planning

If someone might leave, start preparing before they do.

Recognising the warning signs gives you time to try to re-engage a valued employee. It also gives you time to prepare for the possibility that they may still leave.

First, look internally. Is there someone in the team who could step up into the role? If so, consider what development or support they would need to be ready.

If there is no clear internal successor, start thinking externally.

A trusted recruitment partner can help you confidentially identify and pipeline relevant talent before a resignation happens.

Potential candidates can be mapped, approached and pre-qualified for a possible future opportunity. If a resignation does happen, you already have a relevant talent pool to return to, helping you move quickly and potentially create time for a stronger handover.

Ask yourself:

- If they resigned tomorrow, how quickly could we respond?
- Who could step up internally?
- If no one is ready, who is available externally?

Plan Before You Need To Recruit

If you are concerned that a key person may leave, Radial can help you confidentially explore the market and begin building a talent pipeline before you need it.

Speak with Susan Lindsay about succession planning. Start the conversation by emailing her at susan.lindsay@radialrecruitment.com.

ABOUT RADIAL RECRUITMENT

At Radial Recruitment, we partner with organisations to strengthen leadership teams through strategic hiring and talent advisory support. Just as importantly, we help businesses think proactively about retention, succession planning and the long-term capability of their teams.

Whether you're looking to retain key people, redesign a critical role or make your next senior appointment, our focus is always the same: helping organisations make better talent decisions.



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