

# Disrespected Employees Are Quitting. What Can Managers Do Differently?

New modes of working require managers to adapt the ways they signal respect for employees.

Kristie Rogers and Beth Schinoff • July 28, 2022

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In a changing world of work — one in which remote

**The Research**

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This question is top of mind for employees, whether managers recognize it or not. According to a recent [Pew Research survey](#), employees who quit their job in the past year reported feeling disrespected as a leading reason, after low pay and lack of advancement opportunities. When employees do not feel respected, they leave, and it's up to managers to address this problem.

As researchers specializing in respect, workplace relationships, and virtual work, we recognize that respect at work is needed more than ever. Ironically, though, the ways for managers to effectively show their remote employees respect seem to be less clear than ever because the typical signals of respect that research prescribes largely necessitate in-person interaction. Indeed, most of the signals that managers are told to give are subtle, easier to provide in informal settings, and often contagious to others when everyone is in the same physical space — all conditions that are more difficult to replicate in virtual settings.

In this article, we draw upon our own published research focusing on respect at work and remote work relationships, as well as the broader literature on these topics, real-world examples, and findings from a qualitative, open-ended survey that we conducted. (See “The Research.”) Our work suggests that the meaning of respect has not changed for employees in the shift to remote work but that many leaders need to

working in hybrid or remote arrangements how they give and receive respect.

- We asked employees to describe how their managers show respect, provide examples of when they felt a lack of respect or disrespected, and how they wish their managers would show them respect.
- We asked managers to describe how they show their remote employees respect, any challenges they face in doing so, and what advice they would give to other managers of remote employees.
- From the 200 participants, we identified 284 distinct instances of giving or receiving respect.
- Based on our knowledge of research on

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# What Has and Hasn't Changed About Respect?

It's no surprise that everyone wants to feel respected when they show up to work — whether reporting to a physical office or logging in remotely from home.

Research validates the importance of recognizing others' worth as employees and as people. Employees who feel respected perform better and report greater well-being, while those who don't feel respected are more likely to dislike their jobs and ultimately quit.

Research also shows that there are two distinct types of respect at work: the baseline level of respect that we're all *owed* as valued members of the workforce, and the respect that we *earn* for meeting or exceeding work expectations. This understanding of how respect operates is rooted in fundamental human needs and remains as true now as ever.

So, what about respect *has* changed? Prior to the pandemic, shows of respect commonly came through subtle social cues and gestures, such as greeting colleagues in passing, holding open a door, or humbly sharing credit for successes. There was also an understanding of how these respectful behaviors could become contagious when others observed them and were part of the social norms of an in-person environment. However, research finds that employees who work remotely focus more on tasks than on how they interact with others, and thus feel less respected.

coded each answer for the type of respectful behavior (for example, monetary reward, personal note), and the impact that the behavior had on the employee (as reported by either the employee or manager).

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of working is fundamentally changing the social fabric of organizations and accompanying norms. Opportunities to communicate casually or serendipitously are now scarce. This shift is also changing the ways that employees can communicate how respected they feel, or how they want to be respected.

## Four Ways to Show Respect

We recommend four concrete actions in which managers can most effectively show respect for employees within these new working contexts. To bring these actions to life, we provide specific examples from the qualitative, open-ended survey that we conducted. We present these four behaviors in order of how often employees and managers cited them as effective.

### Using time to show respect.

The pandemic has changed how many employees use their time, both to complete their work tasks and to manage the boundary between work and home life. For employees in our survey, using time to show respect was the most commonly cited respectful behavior that they wanted from their manager. Two adjustments related to time can help you more

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**Invest your minutes in quick check-ins that save employees hours.** Above all else, employees reported that knowing their managers are willing to use their own time to check in makes them feel more respected. This is not drastically different from when people work in person, but *how* managers use their time to show respect is. First, because employees who work remotely may, as one of our participants noted, worry about being “out of sight, out of mind,” use check-in time to be sure you understand what your employees are working on and, most important, how you can help them. Use the time to ensure that your remote employees have the resources they need to get their work done. But also use these meetings to go beyond tasks alone. Remote workers who felt respected have managers who show genuine interest in how they are doing as people and in their nonwork lives.

An important caveat to check-ins is that managers should understand how their employees want to check in with them. Some employees reported that checking in too often got in the way of their work and said they prefer something very quick, like Slack messages, while others consider short meetings or phone calls highly valuable. Managers’ responsiveness outside of these check-ins is also important for feeling valued. Employees in our survey described the frustration of being stuck, reaching out to their manager, and then having to wait for a response; it could completely derail their workday. As a manager, even if you can’t fix a problem immediately, a short and timely response

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**Protect their time.** Research shows that how employees use their time is closely tied to their identity. One manager in our survey explained allowing an employee to shift their work schedule to be able to do school drop-off. This did not impact work quality, and it made a substantial difference in the employee's family life and mental health, making the employee feel respected. If flexibility is feasible, ask employees about how this would be most helpful to them, and as several employees in our survey noted, be sure to follow up on a regular basis to see if the arrangement is still working. Minimizing interruptions by consolidating messages and not holding meetings for questions that can be answered via email are also excellent strategies for signaling that you respect employees' time.

## Using validation to show respect.

Research suggests that a critical way to show your employees respect is by validating the work they do. This is especially true because employees who work remotely may be seen as deprioritizing work and making fewer meaningful work contributions. Indeed, research finds that employees who work remotely are less likely to receive the "big" forms of validation such as pay raises and promotions for these very reasons.

In our survey, remote employees reported feeling validated in their performance when a manager

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the same survey, managers reported offering broad or general expressions of respect for their employees and entire team, “just thanking them for their efforts,” more often than specifically validating an individual employee’s performance. Given this disconnect, it is critical that managers make the effort to validate remote employees’ work specifically, explicitly, and intentionally. Send an email to acknowledge something good they did, schedule a phone call with a [“thank you”](#) for a specific contribution as the only thing on your agenda, or take time to highlight their work in a check-in meeting.

To maximize momentum toward a goal, don’t wait until they’ve completed a project. Instead, offer regular feedback that validates employees as they make progress. Validating these smaller steps toward a larger goal will help your employees feel more confident and capable in completing the related tasks ahead. It will also help you keep remote employees’ contributions top of mind to avoid the biased assumption that they are contributing less simply because they are working remotely.

You can also create opportunities for your employees to validate each other’s performance. [For example](#), one company’s vice president kicked off every Monday morning by publicly reading acknowledgments about employees from both customers and other employees. Many companies using collaboration platforms such as Slack set up a “praise channel” to

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allows employees to show each other that they are valued and also reinforces a culture of respect.

## Using tangibility to show respect.

Much of the remote work experience is intangible. Even though knowledge workers rarely produced a physical work product when they were in an office, they likely shared a physical workspace that included tangible artifacts of their company's culture and cues that they were respected (for instance, awards or recognitions displayed on the walls; spacious, private offices; or company-sponsored meals to show appreciation). Despite the lack of these types of cues in virtual settings, managers can still help remote employees feel valued with a tangible expression of respect.

For example, managers in our sample described sending cakes to employees' homes on their birthdays, and sending handwritten notes along with gift cards. For employees in our survey, tangible gifts do make a difference in feeling respected, from receiving a surprise care package filled with company-branded swag to an unexpected monetary bonus.

However, not all tangible expressions of respect carry over well from a colocated setting to a virtual one. For example, one manager recounted a remote pizza party thrown for the team that, while well intended, felt awkward and less natural than an in-person event. As

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tangibility is important, you want to focus on tangible signals that fit with the team's virtual interaction norms and comfort. And if a hybrid arrangement enables you to be colocated at times, consider whether a tangible signal of respect is best suited for your time together.

## Using visibility to show respect.

Without regular face-to-face encounters in the office, [research suggests](#) that employees can struggle to feel seen, even when they're excelling in their jobs. Remote employees may especially struggle to make their work known to higher-level leaders and other employees, both within and outside of their work team. Increasing visibility was the fourth most common action that made employees in our survey feel respected. They provided examples of their managers "complimenting my work to senior management," "inviting me to meetings that are above my level in the company," and giving personal "shout-outs at team meetings."

Once again, we noticed a disconnect between what remote employees want and what managers reported providing. Managers in our sample described organizing social gatherings or expressing gratitude more frequently than actions related to increasing employee visibility. But our survey suggests that remote employees may not see these social efforts or broad expressions of gratitude as conveying respect

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Copy your boss on a “thank you” email to your employee, use team meeting time to publicly recognize your employees’ efforts, or offer high performers an opportunity to present their work to the leadership team. These actions can help employees feel seen in the organization and know what opportunities might lie ahead for them.

## Identifying Patterns of Respect Signals

For managers, it’s important to remember that every signal of respect is contextualized for employees alongside signals they have received in the past from you and others in the organization. In fact, in our analysis of the qualitative data, we noted that many of the employees who reported feeling respected by their manager described a combination of respect signals from that manager.

If, for example, you have routinely overlooked showing your employees respect but they suddenly receive a handwritten note from you in the mail, they may take that “grand” gesture as insincere. If employees learn that other managers in the company are routinely engaging in respectful behaviors and you are not, the comparison may color their interpretation of your respect signals. Given that the world of work has shifted, understanding and conveying respect signals that feel appropriate to your employees and perhaps

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groundwork does not already exist) will strengthen the signals that you do send.

As the world of work changes, so does the social fabric in which signals of respect are embedded. The question is not whether respect still matters — it will always matter. Instead, the critical work for managers is recognizing how best to show it. Whether your workforce is virtual or hybrid, small updates to *how* you show your employees that you value them can have big, lasting impacts on their well-being and, ultimately, on whether they stay or leave.

## Topics

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