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They Stayed. That Doesn’t Mean They Wanted To.

Retention is a number. Commitment is an experience.

BY DAVID AMBROSE · OCTOBER 23, 2026

For a long time, I stayed in a job even though I wasn’t happy. Finding another job takes time and energy, with no guarantee of a better one at the end. The job market feels more unpredictable now. When you already have a paycheck, leaving it for a possibility can feel like a risk you cannot afford.

From the outside, staying can look like comfort. From the inside, it can be a calculation: the familiar dissatisfaction of this job against the uncertain cost of starting over. Sometimes people choose what they know because they cannot absorb the risk of what they don’t.

A recent USA TODAY article by Alyshia Hull, “Want employees to stay? Pay matters, but managers matter, too”, describes how respect, clarity, and autonomy can shape employees’ motivation.

I agree those things matter. But staying in a job does not necessarily mean you want to be there. I’ve heard former colleagues describe feeling the same way.

In a previous role, a senior operations leader often said she wanted the company to become an “employer of choice.” I wanted to believe that promise. But from where I stood, working conditions did not improve. Business was sluggish, wages stayed stagnant, and some new hires were paid more than seasoned employees. Employees judge that promise against their daily experience, not its wording.

That is why a stable team can give a misleading impression. No one has quit. The shifts are covered. The business may count that as a success. But people can stay while growing quieter, offering less, and feeling less connected to the work. They may be there because leaving is hard, not because the job has earned their loyalty.

Managers can make the daily experience better. They can explain decisions, treat people with respect when mistakes happen, recognize good work, and follow up when employees raise concerns. As Hull’s article suggests, clarity and autonomy matter. So does being noticed for doing the job well.

But those actions cannot make an underpaid job fairly paid, create a promotion that does not exist, or staff a shift the company has underfunded. When employees raise concerns and nothing changes, more check-ins will not make them feel heard.

A manager may be responsible for keeping a team engaged while having little authority over the conditions that determine whether staying is worthwhile. That does not excuse poor leadership. Managers still control how they communicate, whether they follow through, and whether they treat people fairly. But responsibility has to match authority. If a company expects managers to retain employees, it has to give them the ability to address the problems employees identify. When it cannot, it should be honest about that.

When a team has low turnover, the useful question is not only, “How many people stayed?” It is also, “Why did they stay?”

Did they stay because they trusted the workplace and saw a future there? Or did they stay because leaving felt too risky?

Those answers can produce the same schedule. They do not describe the same workplace.

A person can stay and still be halfway out the door. The number tells you who is still there. It cannot tell you whether they wanted to stay.