

EXECUTIVE & HR LEADERS



MASKING

Why the best people go quiet long before they quit

— AN EXECUTIVE INSIGHT REPORT —

LOGAN MUIR

*Most of what's wrong inside an organization never
shows up in a report.*

*It shows up in a pause. A careful answer. A meeting
where the smartest person in the room says
nothing.*

“How are you?” “Good.”

You already know this exchange. You have it ten times a day.

“How are you?” “Good. You?” “Good.”

Nobody’s lying, exactly. They’re *masking*, smoothing the surface so the day can keep moving. And for the most part, it works. The work gets done. The meetings end on time. The dashboard stays green.

But somewhere in your organization right now, one of your best people is in that exchange, and the honest answer isn’t “good.” It’s “I’m running on empty,” or “I stopped saying what I think two cycles ago,” or “I’ve already started looking.” They won’t say it. Not because they’re dishonest, but because somewhere along the way they learned the real answer costs more than it’s worth.

“How are you?” · continued

That’s masking. And here’s the part that should get your attention: **the better the person, the better the mask.** Your highest performers are the most fluent at looking fine. They’ve had the most practice. Which means the people you can least afford to lose are exactly the ones whose struggle is hardest to see, until the day they’re already gone.

And if this reads like an indictment of your people, it isn’t. Because you do it too. We all do. We mask at dinner tables, in our text messages, sometimes in the mirror. It’s a survival skill we learn young. So by the time someone walks into your building, they’re already fluent in it. The only real question is how much of it is happening where the stakes are highest: at work, where being honest can cost a person a raise, a role, or a reputation.

This isn’t a story about disengaged people. It’s a story about good people, protecting themselves, in a system that taught them to.

Why the mask goes on

First, the scale, because it reframes everything. Gallup's latest data finds only about **one in five employees is fully engaged at work**, meaning four out of five are not. Not lazy, not incompetent. Checked out, holding back, going through the motions. This isn't a fringe of bad apples. It's the default state of the modern workplace. So the real question isn't *who's* masking. It's *why almost everyone is*.

Ask *why* someone masks and you'll usually hear soft answers.

"Psychological safety." "Culture." "Burnout." All real. But underneath them is something more structural, and more honest:

Most people work for their organization. Very few work with it.

Why the mask goes on · continued

For is a transaction. I give you hours, you give me money, and we both quietly understand the deal: the moment the math changes, it ends. If margins tighten, the company will cut. If a better offer lands, the person will leave. Nobody says it out loud, but everybody feels it. And you cannot be fully honest inside a relationship you know is conditional. So you manage the impression. You mask.

You can have someone's hands and their back, their hours, their compliance, their competence — and still not have their heart and their mind. And the gap between those two is where your real performance lives.

Here's the uncomfortable symmetry: **the loyalty isn't missing on one side. It's missing on both.** Organizations trained people not to trust them. And people responded exactly as you'd expect: one hand on the door. It's not cynicism. It's a rational response to a deal everyone knows is conditional. That's the machine producing the mask. Not bad people. A bad deal.

It was never a performance problem

When the numbers slip, the instinct is to manage performance. More metrics, more accountability, more pressure. Squeeze harder. But you can't squeeze belonging out of people. And belonging is what's actually missing.

Think about the person on your team who'd run through a wall for you. Now think about why. It's almost never the comp. It's that they feel *seen*. That someone knows what they're carrying, values what they bring, and would have their back if it came to it. That feeling isn't a perk. It's the precondition for everything else.

It was never only about the pay. It's whether people feel seen, valued, and part of something.

This is the reframe most leaders have backwards: **belonging isn't the reward you give people once performance is good. It's the soil performance grows out of.** Engagement, discretionary effort, innovation, retention. Every one is downstream of whether a person feels they belong here.

It was never a performance problem · continued

And this isn't a soft idea. It's one of the most established findings in human science. The need to belong is a fundamental human drive, wired into us as deeply as the need for safety. Harvard's 85-year study of adult development found the single strongest predictor of a long, healthy, fulfilled life wasn't wealth or achievement. It was the quality of a person's relationships. When connection is present, people open up, take risks, give their best. When it's missing, they protect themselves. They mask.

And the workplace data tracks the science exactly. Strong belonging at work links to roughly **56% higher job performance** and a **50% lower risk of turnover** (Harvard Business Review). Flip it over: replacing one skilled person who quietly walks out runs **half to two times their salary**, and Gallup pegs the global cost of disengagement at **\$8.8 trillion**, about 9% of GDP. The mask isn't a soft problem. It's one of the most expensive line items you never see.

Performance is a lagging indicator. Belonging is the leading one.

Why your engagement survey can't see this

If belonging is the thing that matters, why don't the tools you already have catch it? **Because the tools measure the mask.**

An engagement survey asks people how they feel, inside the exact system that taught them not to say. The candid ones have often already left. The ones who remain learned that honesty is a career risk, so they answer the way they answer "how are you?": smoothly, safely, *good*. You're not measuring how your people are. You're measuring the quality of their masks. The view from the top is the most flattering, least accurate view in the building.

You can't fix what you can't see. And you can't see what people have learned not to show.

Why your engagement survey can't see this · continued

Wellness perks have the same blind spot. A meditation app and a fruit basket treat the surface of a problem that lives much deeper. People appreciate them and mask right through them.

Here's the tell: organizations have spent *billions* on engagement surveys and wellness programs for over a decade, and by Gallup's own measure, engagement has barely moved, and recently slid backward. That's not a failure of effort. It's a failure of instrument.

*You cannot move a number you're measuring
through a mask.*

What actually moves it

The shift is simple to name and hard to fake: **from for to with**.

When a person stops feeling like a resource being managed and starts feeling like someone the organization is genuinely *with*, invested in who they're becoming, not just what they produce, the mask comes down. Not because you ran a campaign. Because it's finally safe to.

And when the mask comes down, you get what no performance system can manufacture: people who tell you the truth early, while problems are still cheap to fix. People who bring their best thinking instead of protecting it. People who stay, not because they're trapped, but because they'd rather be here.

You might be thinking: *that's fine for mission-driven companies, but mine isn't one*. Good news. You don't need a grand purpose. Belonging doesn't require a noble mission. It requires people feeling genuinely seen and valued, and that's available on every team, in every industry, no matter what you make or sell. Do that, and meaning takes care of itself.

*That's the most leveraged thing a leader can do.
Everything you actually care about is sitting on the
other side of it.*

Why I'm sharing this

When I left the corporate world, it was because I was tired of masking. Tired of “good” being the only acceptable answer. So I set out to build something where people wouldn't have to.

It took years. And the proof came from my own team. While we were building the systems and the software from nothing, before the company turned a profit, before there was real money to offer — I had thirty people. Fifteen of them showed up twice a week, for hours, for years.

They didn't stay for a paycheck. There wasn't one to stay for. They stayed for what we were building together, and for what happened in that room.

The interconnection between us was the whole reason. And it showed me something I couldn't unsee: no paycheck buys that. People give that kind of time, for that long, for one reason. They believe in something, they can see it's possible, and they feel like it's theirs.

Why I'm sharing this · continued

Let me be clear about money, because this is where people hear the wrong lesson. This isn't an argument for paying people less. It's the opposite. Pay your best people exceptionally. Underpaying the ones who drive your results is the most expensive "saving" you will ever make.

But money alone was never the answer either. My team proved you can have belief without pay. Plenty of well-paid teams prove you can have pay without belief. Neither one, on its own, lasts. **It's both.** You don't choose between people who genuinely care and a business that performs. Belonging and fair reward were never rivals. Together, they're the only thing that's *sustainable*.

Why I'm sharing this · continued

And here's what belonging becomes when a whole team feels it: **interconnection**. Not people managing their own corners, but a team genuinely woven together — the one thing no competitor can copy and no market can take. When people feel seen, valued, and part of something, you have what money alone never could.

That practice, making sure every person on a team is genuinely seen, heard, and valued, became something we simply call **the Connect**. No agenda but that. And every time, it surfaces the conversations that matter most: the ones that never make it onto a survey.

That's the work. And it's more available to you than you think.

AN INVITATION

The opposite of masking isn't
honesty.
It's belonging.

Reading about it is one thing. Feeling it is another. Bring your leaders into one room and watch the masks come down. That's a **Leadership Connect**: ninety minutes with your team, facilitated by us, free. A conversation, not a pitch. Most leaders walk away knowing their team better than a year of surveys ever told them.

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Sources: Gallup, *State of the Global Workplace* (engagement and cost of disengagement) and turnover-cost analysis; BetterUp / *Harvard Business Review*, "The Value of Belonging at Work" (2019); Harvard Study of Adult Development.