



# **THE PROBLEM WITH OUR AMBITION,** **AND THE NEGOTIATION-RESIGNATION-RENEGOTIATION CONTINUUM** **Rha Goddess**

# Most of my clients come to me believing that their problem is with work. They've hit a career wall.

They think their job or business is—or was—the cause of their burnout, chronic anxiety, insomnia, or panic attacks. They believe their inability to achieve the goals they set for themselves is the result of some failure or lack on their part. They think they've hit a career wall and they have the bumps and bruises (in the form of stress, migraines, high-blood pressure, you name it) to prove it. But even though those bumps and bruises are real, the work—either what they're doing or how they're doing it—is only a problem. It's not *the* problem. Just like the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dilemmas it leads to, unhappiness with work is itself a symptom of something deeper. And like any symptom, it will persist until the underlying challenge is identified and resolved.

So, what then, is the underlying issue? I've found that many of us have a dysfunctional relationship with ambition, which comes from a distorted perception of who we really are and a debilitating definition of success. The goals that dictate the course of our existence are literally making us sick. The wall we're hitting is not a career wall. It's a life wall.

## Many of us have a dysfunctional relationship with ambition . . .

## THE PROBLEM WITH OUR AMBITION

In our country, the culture of work is built on a skewed relationship with ambition, or, as I think of it, wanting. There's often a disconnect between what we say we want versus what we really want (the doctor who longed to be a painter but didn't want to disappoint her parents). There's often a gap between what's seen as "acceptable" to want versus what is not (the manager who'd be so much happier being managed); this gap is usually occupied by fear or shame. There are things we don't allow ourselves to even admit we want because, usually without realizing it, we don't believe we'll ever achieve it or many times we question if we're even worthy. We try to fill what's wanting (missing) from our lives by wanting (desiring) things that won't actually fill the void. Often, we wind up wanting what's perceived as acceptable, and we push our own desires aside. Furthermore, we adopt the dictated habits and actions that support these "respectable" desires (being the first one in the office and the last one to leave, for example).

All of this causes us to lose touch with ourselves. And because we've lost touch with who we really are and what we really need, we don't understand what motivates us to pursue what we really want. We avoid thinking about how much we're willing to compromise to get it. And we don't stop to consciously consider how we'll know—and feel—when we've achieved it.

When I first started hearing stories about the "Great Resignation" in 2020, I was fascinated but not surprised. Millions of people were quitting their jobs en masse, month over month, across all industries. Journalists and analysts and experts seemed to find the phenomenon shocking and reported on it incredulously—how could so many people quit their jobs with no other prospects? In the middle of a pandemic, no less?

The media painted workers as simply being “burnt out” and—in the wake of the reassessing that the pandemic provoked—deciding that they wanted more: more pay, more flexibility, more overall happiness. While on the surface this may be true, there are layers upon layers of lived experience that have brought so many to the brink.

Beyond all the data and estimations are the harsh realities of what people have endured over the last 25 years in a culture that has demanded work-based productivity above all else—joy, health, family, you name it. The growing demands on the average worker in the face of diminishing wages, toxic corporate cultures, and stalled professional mobility have finally reached a breaking point. And even as we examine the current state, post-pandemic, we apparently have graduated from the Great Resignation to the Great Gloom! According to Bamboo HR’s June 2023 findings, employee dissatisfaction was at an all-time high with evaluations plummeting “with no indication of slowing down.”

So, what have we been through over the last 25 years that might warrant this massive upheaval? Over the last two decades we’ve had three major blows to our economy (i.e. work stability and security) all rooted in some form of tragedy. From 9/11 in 2001 to the Great Recession in the late 2000s to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the last 25 years have given us so much volatility and uncertainty that the average worker has been pivoting like a ballerina on steroids just to keep their head above water. And this is not just low-wage workers; when we dig into the realities of high-level executives we see the trade of better wages in exchange for way more stress and far less life. If we layer on all of the global and regional conflicts, the rise in identity-based violence, massive corruption on the part of political and business leaders, and not-so-random mass shootings, there is something way more troubling brewing underneath the surface of our daily realities.

To quote the wisdom of nFormation's PowHerRedefined report, We aren't just burnt out, we're traumatized! Many of us are mentally, physically, and emotionally stretched far beyond what is feasible, and quite frankly, people have had it!

But even while we experience this precarious, overstretched, and overstressed reality, we're still being driven, constantly pushed, and encouraged to strive for more. This quest for more has caused us to question: *What are we really doing all of this striving for?*

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The Great Resignation has been a response to our skewed relationship to work and the long-standing expectation that for most of us, work has traditionally been this all-consuming barrage of demands we try our best to survive and get through: the ingrained knee-jerk reaction to bury our own wants, needs, desires, and voices, as the work keeps piling up; the almost unanimous agreement to live each day in fear of how we will be perceived and ultimately valued as we try to determine if we're on the "ins" or the "outs"; the relentless pressure to navigate the ever-shifting terrain of somebody else's playing field while trying to succeed and advance according to those ever-elusive rules has finally caught up. All that wanting has turned into an overwhelming, undeniable *I want out*.

Our relationship with work has been shaped by all of the messages we've received and by the examples we've witnessed over time. It's influenced by our perceived station in life and by the degree to which we believe that station is malleable. It's also shaped by our perception of the state of our external world and the way the impending doom on the five o'clock news finds its way to our front door. So when I say, life wall, I really mean it. This never-ending cycle of striving to meet this (debilitating, elusive, hollow, you name it) standard of success which is meant to define our status, viability, and credibility (aka worthiness) impacts every facet of the quality of our existence. And if we don't get underneath what's driving all of this, we may never get to a place in life or work where we truly feel happy or fulfilled.

## THE NEGOTIATION-RESIGNATION-RENEGOTIATION CONTINUUM

In order to chart the path for where we want to go, it's important to understand where we've been, who we've been, and why it's led so many of us to the brink.

## YOU SAY NEGOTIATION, I SAY NAVIGATION

When we set off at the genesis of our professional career, we enter into what I call the **Negotiation phase**. This is the phase where we arrive on the frontlines with great enthusiasm ready to embark on the grand adventure of our profession. Our primary aims in this phase are to learn the ropes by identifying what the standard of success is and determining what's required of us to meet that standard.

When we are Negotiating, we've already accepted that the game is mostly going to be played on somebody else's terms, i.e. on the terms of those who set (the table) and define the standard. Our intention is to try to get as close as we can to that standard while at the same time minimizing our level of risk. We tell ourselves it's necessary to make concessions in order to reap the rewards—and that's how the Negotiation (as in Navigation) begins. As we play the game of concession/reward, we are deep in the trade, operating with the belief that somehow, some way, we'll end up on top. We'll feel as though we have achieved something important. We'll be the hero, and others will look to us as successful—as if we've finally arrived. We'll be acknowledged, we'll be respected, and we'll be worthy to be praised.

But over time, as the terrain shifts, as priorities change on all sides, and as the demands for greater, more dramatic concessions arise, we start to question whether the standard is all it's cracked up to be. When we reach this point of reckoning in the Negotiation phase, we start to realize that most of our wheeling and dealing has been with ourselves; trading in ways that have left us feeling angry, frustrated, and even bankrupt (philosophically, morally, energetically, you name it). No matter how we arrive at that point, there is a moment when we each look ourselves in the eye and consciously choose—either to keep going along to get along or move in a totally different (i.e. new and sometimes terrifying) direction.

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## ARE YOU RESIGNED OR DID YOU RESIGN?

If we choose to consciously Negotiate (aka Navigate) as in go along to get along, that puts us into the **Resignation phase**. When we are Resigned, it means we have accepted that the standard of success for us in this situation is unachievable or is no longer desired. Initially, the Resignation is internal and represents our succumbing to the apathy we feel about the situation and more often about the people involved. They will not see us. They will not honor us. They will not invest in us. They will not advance us. The situation is hopeless and will not change. We will not get the opportunity to be heroic here. In the traditional definition of resignation, we give up—on the people, the situation, and sometimes even ourselves. But we stay in the same place, literally and metaphorically, nurturing our disappointment. This form of resignation can last for two minutes (as a precursor to Resignation 2.0) or for decades. We can spend endless years just going through the motions hoping and praying that things will get better.

But for some, at some point, in our many stages of grief, we get pissed! And, as we turn inward to face the alienation and isolation we feel, we awaken, and we begin to recognize the cost of our previous negotiations (aka navigations) and the things we traded that ultimately may not have been good for us. We start to examine the things we've sacrificed and endured and we move into a different form of Resignation, the one that has us say, "That's it!" And we do whatever we have to do to make a change. We finally let go—we quit or get fired or even just put our foot down right where we are. Some of us do it quietly, and some of us do it loud and proud. In this stage, *quitting is actually part of waking up*.



## WHY RENEGOTIATION IS ESSENTIAL

Quitting can be tricky. When we do, in the moment we may feel high, giddy even, but when the adrenaline rush subsides, it can leave us feeling lost and thinking “Now what?” That brings us to the **Renegotiation phase**.

This phase begins with some courageous soul searching and calls for new definitions for work and success. When we are renegotiating, we’re coming to the table with a whole new set of terms. We’re looking to be met eye to eye and, dare I say, heart to heart. We embrace the fact that we are older, wiser, and that our lived experience gives us a more wide-eyed approach to new opportunities. We bring our optimism, but we are also grounded in where the guardrails are when it comes to our values and willingness to sign on. When we renegotiate, we are seeking alignment and affirmation that who we are and what we stand for is welcome here. We bring our desire to be inspired, and we bring our desire to be heroic—with a deepened more seasoned understanding of what is required for us to contribute and shine.

Now that you understand each phase (negotiation, resignation, and renegotiation), you can start to observe where you are in your process. Notice what’s informing your decisions in real time. You may find that as you take an inventory, you are at different stages in different areas of your life and work. For example, you may be in the Negotiation phase in your work but in the Resignation phase in an intimate love relationship. You may be in the Resignation phase when it comes to an old circle of friends, but in the Renegotiation phase when it comes to your health and well-being.

The gift of hitting your career wall is that it's bound to illuminate what is or isn't happening in every other area of your life. The invitation to Renegotiation doesn't just impact your work and the way you work; it affects the way you define and pursue any form of ambition and desired success. No matter where you are in the journey, you cannot get to Renegotiation without moving through Resignation, and you can't arrive at Resignation without first experiencing the effects of Negotiation (aka Navigation). The more you can understand about how you arrived at your current state and the motivations that got you there, the more you can leverage that awareness to help shape and inform how you'd like to move forward. So I want you to consider right now, where have you sacrificed in order to succeed?

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## YOUR TERMS

### JOURNAL EXERCISE:

1. Where are you? Take a moment to identify where along the continuum you may be as you think about your own life and work.
2. As you respond to question 1, notice how you feel about the stage in the continuum you've chosen and choices you've made thus far.
3. As you consider where you are right now in your own life and work, is there an opportunity for Renegotiation? If so, where? Try to be as specific here as you can.

**For more downloadable tools and resources, go to: <https://www.movethecrowd.me/freeresources>. **

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RHA GODDESS is the founder and CEO of Move The Crowd, Born To Shine, and the Co-founder of nFormation, a first-of-its-kind membership platform created by women of color, for women of color. She is the entrepreneurial soul coach behind hundreds of breakthrough changemakers, cultural visionaries, and social entrepreneurs. From the onset of her more than 30-year career as a cultural innovator, social impact strategist, and creative change agent, Rha has drawn on the power of creativity, culture, and community to move hearts, minds and policy. Rha's work has focused on issues of racial justice and equality, electoral politics, offender aid and restoration, mental health, youth and women's empowerment, and contributed to initiatives that impacted millions of lives.



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