

# STOP FALLING IN LOVE WITH SOLUTIONS

BEFORE UNDERSTANDING THE  
PROBLEMS



**OKR**  
COHORT

In our first report, we discussed the Great Resignation, a term that everyone by now is very familiar with. Linked to employee burnout or disengagement, is now another phrase that has recently become very popular on social media platforms called 'quiet quitting'.<sup>1</sup> This is when employees decide to stop going the extra mile at work or putting in any further effort than is required to do their job, due to lack of motivation or appreciation from their employers. This creates a downward spiraling effect on the employee and employer. OKRs can help many organizations address this problem.

OKR (Objective and Key Results) is a strategy and alignment framework used to achieve an organization's desired outcomes through common goals, shared commitments, and clear accountability. As co-founders of OKR Cohort, Denise Kanfield and I have worked with various organizations to implement the OKR framework which has led to transparency on the organization's strategy and direction; directly leading to employee engagement and satisfaction. In turn, when employees are motivated and feel their work is impactful, this directly and positively impacts client satisfaction.

But first, the problem must be understood further in terms of what leads to employees being demotivated and disengaged and how this can be resolved.

## **THE MISUNDERSTANDINGS RUN DEEP WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS**

When working on strategy or initiative planning, many managers don't understand a problem or opportunity at first. They always start with brainstorming and focusing on solutions. That inevitably causes a lot of rework and frustration among employees within organizations. Supervisors and managers are accustomed to telling their people what to do. But that isn't necessarily the right

approach in terms of the priority and value to the company or customer. The issue here is that the employees don't challenge them and often just jump into the doing what has been asked. This leads to everyone being busy and yet, no one is truly creating value and moving the company forward.

This presents a real challenge because telling people what to do creates a reactive versus a proactive culture. When you have a reactive culture, you're going to have a lack of prioritization or even worse -- everything is going to be a priority and people won't know where to focus. They will end up delivering things that don't matter or aren't aligned towards the company or organizations' goals. Ultimately this way of working is not going to generate value and, in those situations, we consistently see competitors and disruptors outpacing the organization and even sometimes stealing customers.

We also see there is a lack of connection between the priority of the organization and actual day-to-day work that is being done by their teams when employees are relying on directions from their supervisor or manager. Usually, it leads to linear thinking which stifles creativity and collaboration. Ultimately, this results in a disconnect from the organization's strategy.

## THE BIG DISCONNECT

When creativity and collaboration are stifled, it causes trust to be broken and employees feel that management has no faith in them to execute or to be creative. When employees start projects based on directions from their managers, but the projects get shelved or remain unfinished because in the middle of the project it's realized that the problem would not be solved by the work that has been done, this leaves employees feeling unfulfilled and demoralized. They feel as though their work didn't count.

As people we like to get things done. If the direction is always changing, you quickly become dissatisfied and feel unfulfilled with your work which takes an emotional toll on you. Additional tasks start to weigh you down and drain your ability to perform.

## **THE NON-VIRTUOUS CYCLE THAT PRECEDES THE DOWNWARD SLIDE**

Denise experienced this when she went to deliver a project she had been asked to complete when she worked for a large organization. When she completed the project and went to deliver it, the person she was to deliver the project to had an embarrassed and shocked look on their face. The person said, “I forgot to tell you that I don't need that anymore.” Talk about the demoralizing impact of working on a project only to be told it wasn't even necessary. It starts to make people question everything supervisors and managers give them to work on.

Another big thing we've noticed is that if the company is not moving forward, they end up in this very bad non-virtuous cycle and it takes them awhile before they realize they're sliding downhill. They start to feel like they are in survival mode instead of growth mode and that kind of unidentified tension within an organization starts to overlay and have this negative connotation throughout the organization. In this kind of situation people tend to overwork themselves with nothing to show for it. We like to use the term ‘burning the candle at both ends.’ It's just exhausting, and it leads to employee disengagement.



When people are tired, when they're burned out, when they're burning the candle at each end, the ripple effect is that people start to leave or get totally checked out; leading to the 'the Great Resignation' or 'Quiet Quitting.' When this happens, your customers start to lose faith in the company. You say you're going to deliver one thing. Then you have this very reactive approach internally. Suddenly, you're delivering something different than what you promised your customers or delivering it late because employees have lost faith in the organization. Customers then leave you for your competitors. This is a real issue as this type of behavior becomes pervasive in an organization.

## HOW TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM AND WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

When we are invited into a company to identify and solve this problem, the organizations' culture becomes more innovative and creative. Individuals and teams suddenly have the opportunity for experimenting and testing. By encouraging creative freedom, employees become more engaged and feel connected with the purpose of their work. Managers and supervisors also learn to be more out-of-the-box and forward thinking while employees are focused and empowered in their day-to-day work. In fact, leaders at all levels then spend more time on the business rather than in the business.

You really start to see the problem turning around when leaders can focus on strategy and leading instead of on problem-solving or telling people what to do. When that happens productivity soars. You will also see that with productivity soaring, you're decreasing the time to get products to market and customers are getting things faster. Additionally, you're seeing efficiency and throughput of work increase

so your teams are able to get more work done because the work they're doing makes sense and delivers value. On top of that, you see customer satisfaction going up. They're happy. They're enjoying the products they're getting because they're getting what they were told they would get. And they get their orders in a timely manner. So, they start to rebuild trust with your organization.

## WORK LIFE BALANCE IMPROVES

When productivity is soaring because you're working on the right things and you're delivering them in a timely manner, your work life balance improves as it does for all your employees. You're less stressed at home. I know most people think they don't bring work home with them. But that's a fallacy when work is bad. We bring that home. Even if we're trying to tamp it down and hide it. So, when work is good and you're delivering high value, getting the right things done, you're less stressed at home. You come home in a place where you really can leave the work behind. You're also home more often. So, you get that high quality time with family, and high-quality time at work.

## THE MEANING AND MISSION BEHIND OKRS

Leaders hire Denise and I to solve problems, to help them shift the focus of their organizations from activities to outcomes so that they can embed purpose in their work. We get them to focus on the right things-- leaders leading people delivering products -- which gets people talking results. So, the bottom line is we really help people get the right stuff done. And we do that through OKRs.

## THERE ARE A FEW STEPS TO PLAN FOR WORK OR ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT OKRS

### STEPS TO PLAN FOR WORK OR ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT OUTCOMES (OKRS)

01

#### Identify Work

- What work (initiatives, activities) will support specific OKRs?

02

#### Understand Impact and Value

- What are impact or value (H,M,L) of the work to the specific OKRs?

03

#### Understand Effort

- How much effort is required for the work (S,M,L,XL)?

04

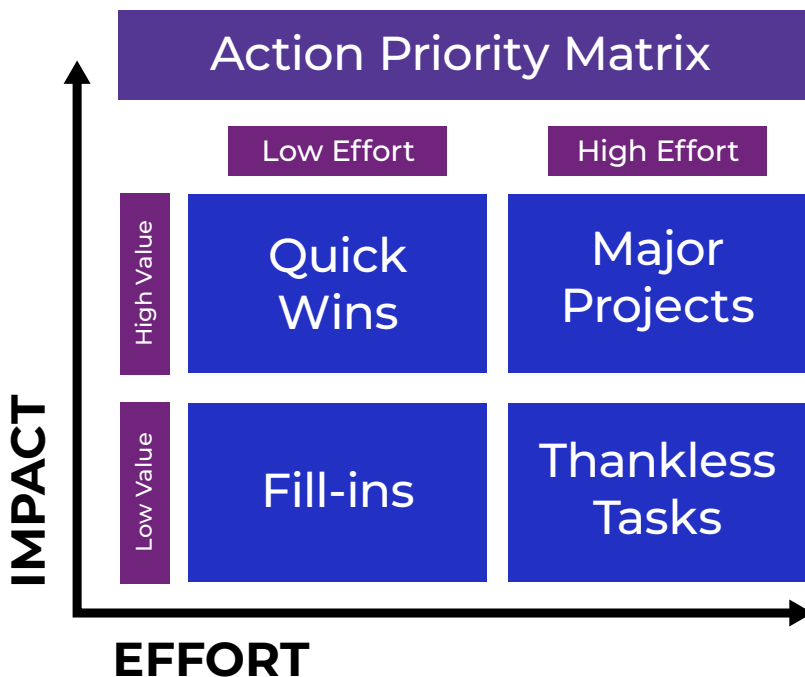
#### Timeline

- When do we need this to deliver? What would be desired start and end-date based on high-level effort sizing?

The OKR Action Priority Matrix is a tool you can then use to prioritize work. It allows leaders to mix their ideas in with the ideas of the team.

So, you've got this set of OKRs. Now you're brainstorming: How are we going to get them done? What's it going to take to get them accomplished? From there you evaluate each idea and place it on the action priority matrix by the level of value that's being delivered and how much effort will it take. Pretty quickly it becomes clear where your focus should be, on quick wins and major projects. You should let go of fill-ins and thankless tasks.

## STEPS TO PLAN FOR WORK OR ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT OUTCOMES (OKRS)



I've seen this framework help organizations decide what to stop doing. It could be your leader's idea up there in the quick win and major projects. If it is, that's great, then run with it. But you will see a lot of work that ends up in fill-ins and thankless tasks, and this rapidly identifies where you should stop doing work and free up the time of your organization and your people.

## IMPLEMENTING THE OKR FRAMEWORK WITH OUR CLIENTS

Denise loves to share this example when we discuss the value of OKRs.

"I worked in a business agility center of excellence. And what I loved about that was how quickly we were able to make an impact. We would bring small teams together like a tiger team and each team would be tasked with completing a body of work within six to twelve weeks. In this time frame you must quickly focus in on nailing the right thing to deliver. We used OKRs to clearly define what that team needed to deliver and what the outcome would be at the end of that

team's time. And then we used the action priority matrix to define what we would do in that time frame and how to accomplish it. It became a way of getting incredibly clear on where to focus the team. It helped us measure the value that we were delivering and over a period of about 18 to 24 months, we were able to prove to the organization that this was an amazing way to work and saw that approach get embedded across full business units. It was really impactful and it changed how people worked day in and day out.”

## HOW I HELPED ONE OF THE BIG FIVE FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS TO WORK WITH OKRS

A couple of years ago in my previous organization -- one of the big five financial institution – I was tasked with helping them determine the most effective way to renovate their Bank branches. And the timeline that was usually the concession people make is around 52 weeks for one branch. So, the first objective was to connect with all the branches to find out what we could do to reduce that timeline. First, we tried to understand the biggest problem which was why it would take 52 weeks to deliver end to end. Once we understood the problem, we had a few OKRs that we set to achieve. One example was enabling efficiency in the renovation process. One of the key results was to decrease the renovation cycle type by half, from 52 to 26 weeks. We identified that there were some things that can be done in parallel which could give us the opportunity to get things moving sooner and faster. We ended up identifying a similar approach of prioritization. We looked at the quick wins and the things that take more time. In the end we were able to finish each renovation within 24 weeks, half the

time they thought it would take. It saved the organization money and time and improved our credibility in the market which delivered a better customer experience.

## LET'S HAVE A CONVERSATION

OKRs are frameworks. They're things that can help you, but they should serve you. You don't serve the framework. So, let's start a conversation. You can reach out to us at the link below. And let's see how we can help you by understanding the problem that you're trying to solve.

**[OKRCOHORT.INSTITUTE/CONNECT](https://okrcohort.institute/connect)**

Our team covered this very topic on a recent episode of our video and podcast series! If you'd like to learn more and enjoy an in-depth conversation surrounding this informative topic, head over to our YouTube channel or visit OKR Cohort on your favorite podcasting platform!



### References

<sup>1</sup> [toronto.ctvnews.ca](https://toronto.ctvnews.ca)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### NIZAR KHOJA



Nizar is considered a thinker, leader, coach and is curious about New Ways of Working, Remote Work, and Digital Enablement! He is passionate about finding ways to make organizations awesome through a culture of efficiency, empowerment, engagement and empathy. Nizar has extensive experience working in different setups and industries (from start-up to large organizations) that enable him to understand how to impact change that could be sustained within specific organizations. He is a firm believer in creating a culture of purposeful and high performing teams to focus on continuous value delivery. Nizar has leveraged Business Agility as a catalyst to serve organizations' purpose and align to work (Outcomes to Output)...agility techniques and framework required to be appropriate for each organizations and group needs.