

## ESCAPING THE TOXIC WORKPLACE: THE ROLE OF AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP IN REDUCING BULLYING-INDUCED COGNITIVE WEARINESS AND TURNOVER

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### Abstract

Workplace bullying is a critical concerned matter, especially in the Pakistani public sector, which is leading to chronic issues relating to psychological and behavioral outcomes among employees. How psychological resources of employees are destroyed this has been investigated with the help of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, and which in result create cognitive weariness and increased turnover intention. Besides this it has been examined also that either authentic leadership acts as a buffering resource and leads to mitigate these negative effects. Data was collected from 270 employees, were working across various public sector organizations in Pakistan by using a structured questionnaire. The findings suggests that workplace bullying significantly causes turnover intention and partially this relationship is mediated by cognitive weariness. Besides this, authentic leadership moderates the intervening effect of bullying on turnover, so that the negative impact diminishes when employees observe their leaders as authentic. This study leads to the literature by highlighting the psychological mechanisms and leadership conditions which affect employees' responses to toxic work environments in the public sector. The practical implications highlight the need for leadership development and anti-bullying policies to reduce employee turnover and protect employee's well-being.

### INTRODUCTION

In highly challenging and fast-paced work environments, serious threat are exposed by workplace bullying to employee well-being and in organizational sustainability (Einarsen et al., 2023; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2022). Workplace bullying is explained as “persistent and repetitive negative actions that target on employee psychology, and become a source in creating a hostile work environment” (Samnani & Singh, 2016). It incorporates negative behaviors such as verbal abuse, social exclusion, and intentional undermining relating professional credibility. These behaviors not

only deteriorate the cognitive and emotional health of employees but also causes severe organizational repercussion including diminished productivity and increased absences turnover intentions (De Cieri et al., 2021; Rai & Agarwal, 2018). Although previous research has identified several antecedents of workplace bullying in literature including abusive supervision, job insecurity, toxic organizational culture (Salin & Hoel 2022; Mackey et al., 2021), and power asymmetries (Branch et al., 2018). The need to understand how organizations can buffer its adverse outcomes was remedied in demand.

Cognitive weariness is among one such outcomes which represents a mental fatigue state resulting from prolonged exposure to stressors and continuous resource depletion. This psychological state mostly become cause or a precursor to increase emotional exhaustion which leads to turnover intentions (Sausan et al., 2022). A few studies have explored even though the cleared connection between workplace bullying and their negative outcomes and a few studies have explored the protective boundary condition that can mitigate the impact of bullying on employees' cognitive and behavioral responses. The current study fills this gap by utilizing the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1996), which asserts that people work to acquire, preserve, and safeguard their psychological resources. Employees who are subjected to pressures like bullying at work quickly lose important resources including self-efficacy, optimism, vitality, and a sense of control. Burnout, disinterest, and eventually a wish to quit the organization are among those adverse emotional and cognitive reactions brought on by this loss (Sulea et al., 2013). However, resource-enabling conditions that support people in replenishing or sustaining their psychological capital are likewise emphasized by COR theory. Applying insight from authentic leadership is one approach to create an environment to mitigate a stressed environment.

Employee resources can be maintained in the midst of distress when authentic leadership is demonstrated by self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective (Walumbwa et al., 2021; Gardner et al., 2021). Authentic leaders can mitigate the resource-draining effects of bullying by establishing a supportive environment which assists staff members to sustain their emotional and psychological resilience through setting an example of moral behavior while promoting psychological safety (Romeedy & Khairy 2024). Therefore, this leadership style offers as a resource-protective factor that decreases the negative effects of workplace bullying on cognitive fatigue and, in turn, on inclinations to quit.

This current study contributes to the existing literature in several diverse ways. First, it highlights that how workplace bullying diminishes the

psychological resources, which causes to increase cognitive weariness and results in employee turnover (Reich et al., 2021). Second, it incorporates authentic leadership as a resource-conserving intervention to reduce the negative effects, grounded in the COR theoretical lens (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Third, recent calls for research have been also responded relating to leadership and employee well-being in other than Western contexts (J Zheng et al., 2020) by discussion a collectivist, high power distance culture context of Pakistan where employees may hesitate to report bullying due to hierarchical barriers (Fatima et al., 2021). In such scenarios, authentic leadership can perform a particular impact in reducing bullying-induced psychological strain and can enhance employee retention (Al-Romeedy & Khairy.,2024). This study offers valuable insights into how an organization can protect their human capital and foster healthier environment, and create more resilient workplaces, by analyzing the mediating role of cognitive weariness and the moderating effect of authentic leadership within the framework of COR.

#### *Literature review*

Organizations are increasingly recognizing the importance of fostering a healthy work environment, as toxic work cultures can significantly impact employee well-being and productivity. A toxic workplace characterized by incivility, bullying, manipulation, discrimination, or unfair treatment which generates sustained stress, emotional exhaustion, and a high intention to quit. Among these elements, workplace bullying stands out as one of the most insidious and pervasive problems in modern organizational life. Workplace bullying refers to repeated and sustained negative actions targeted to an individual or group, which create a hostile and intimidating work environment (Einarsen et al., 2020). This phenomenon is not only detrimental to the individual employee but also threatens the broader organizational climate, reducing morale, efficiency, and ultimately, organizational commitment. Over the years, researchers have attempted to examine the impact of workplace bullying on employees, identifying its effects on job satisfaction, psychological distress, burnout, and turnover intention (Hoel et al., 2020). Yet, despite the growing body of work, the

mechanisms and boundary conditions through which bullying leads to negative outcomes especially in developing countries and fragile public sector contexts remain under-investigated. This gap presents a critical opportunity to adopt Conservation of Resources (COR) theory as a theoretical foundation to explore how resource loss due to bullying leads to cognitive weariness and turnover intention, and how resource-gaining elements such as authentic leadership may mitigate these effects.

COR theory, proposed by Hobfoll (1989), posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect resources, which include objects, personal characteristics, conditions, and energies. When these resources are threatened, lost, or insufficiently replenished, individuals experience psychological stress. According to (Hobfoll et al., 2018), people are more motivated to avoid resource loss than to gain resources, and resource loss is more impactful than resource gain. This theory has become central in explaining how chronic stressors such as workplace bullying trigger a spiral of resource depletion and psychological exhaustion, leading to maladaptive outcomes such as withdrawal, burnout, and turnover intentions (Halbesleben et al., 2014). In this regard, workplace bullying represents a continuous threat to employees' valued resources. Victims of bullying often suffer damage to their emotional energy, self-esteem, professional image, and social status. As the bullying persists, employees must expend or increase levels of cognitive and emotional resources to manage their emotions, defend themselves, and maintain job performance in the face of hostility. This extended coping process depletes the resource reservoir and can result in chronic strain. COR theory holds that such persistent losses will eventually lead to defensive mechanisms such as withdrawal or turnover as employees attempt to prevent further resource loss and regain a sense of control (Malik & Sattar, 2022).

Existing literature affirms that employees exposed to workplace bullying are more likely to disengage from their work, develop cynicism, and ultimately contemplate exiting the organization (Houshmand et al., 2012; Salin & Hoel, 2020). However, these outcomes are magnified in rigid and bureaucratic settings such as the public sector, particularly in countries like Pakistan or where weak governance is

conflicted, and fragile institutions amplify workplace dysfunction (Farooq & Khan, 2019). In such environments, organizational reporting structure mechanisms are often inadequate, power distance is usually high, and job security can be uncertain, this makes employees especially susceptible to the long-term impacts of bullying. Thus, according to COR theory, workplace bullying can be conceptualized as a significant resource-draining phenomenon that pushes employees toward turnover intention as a self-preservation strategy. This leads to the first hypothesis:

***H1: Workplace bullying has a positive impact on turnover intention among public sector employees.***

Beyond the direct effect, COR theory also helps explain how bullying leads to turnover through the intermediate process of psychological and cognitive depletion. One such manifestation of resource loss is cognitive weariness, it is a sub dimension of burnout, characterized by mental fatigue, inability to concentrate, reduced cognitive functioning, and difficulty in decision-making. Prolonged exposure to bullying compel employees to remain hyper-vigilant, defend themselves repeatedly, and manage emotional trauma, all of which require immense cognitive effort. Over time, this leads to a depletion of mental resources, which in COR terms represents a significant spiral loss (Bakker & de Vries, 2021).

Cognitive weariness emerges as an emotional consequence of sustained workplace adversity. Employees struggling with persistent bullying report difficulty in maintaining focus, formulating creative solutions, or performing even routine tasks efficiently (Shirom, 2003). This deterioration of cognitive functioning directly contributes to dissatisfaction and withdrawal intentions. COR theory posits that individuals lacking sufficient resources not only more vulnerable to stress but also less capable of resource gain, creating a downward cycle of helplessness and disengagement (Halbesleben et al., 2014). As cognitive energy drains, employees' ability to cope with bullying erodes, making turnover intention a rational exit strategy to protect remaining psychological resources. While burnout and emotional exhaustion have been examined extensively in prior research, cognitive weariness remains underexplored as a mediating variable. In fragile public sector systems, where role

clarity, employee support, and fair treatment are often absent, cognitive weariness may become a critical factor influencing employee decisions to leave (Samnani & Singh, 2016). The inclusion of cognitive weariness within the COR framework enriches our understanding of the psychological pathway between bullying and turnover. Thus, based on the principles of COR theory, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H2: Cognitive weariness mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention among public sector employees.**

While COR theory emphasizes the negative effects of resource loss, it also highlights that resource gain or the presence of resource-supportive environments can buffer against resource depletion. In this context, authentic leadership defined as a leadership style marked by transparency, perform ethical behavior, **acquaintance** to self-awareness, and follow balanced processing of information, have been used in current research as a potential moderating factor that can mitigate the harmful effects of workplace bullying. Authentic leaders cultivate environments of trust and inclusion, thereby reducing the frequency and impact of toxic behavior and replenishing employees' psychological resources (Walumbwa et al., 2008). According to COR theory, support from authentic leaders provides secondary or replacement resources that can help employees cope with the stress induced by bullying. These leaders validate the experiences of

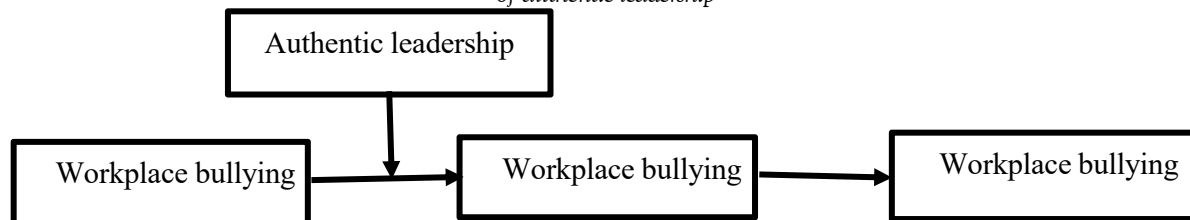
employees, intervene in bullying situations, and reinforce a sense of safety, thereby reducing the cognitive burden on employees (Laschinger et al., 2015). Moreover, authentic leaders encourage positive behavior, empower employees to voice concerns, and promote fair treatment, all of which act as a psychological resource buffer that can weaken the bullying weariness–turnover link.

Despite these theoretical claims, there remains a paucity of research examining how authentic leadership moderates the indirect pathway from bullying to turnover via cognitive weariness, especially in public sectors of low-income or conflict-affected nations. The presence or absence of authentic leadership may play a decisive role in determining whether an employee can cope with bullying or succumbs to resource depletion and leaves the organization. In hostile work environments where bullying is prevalent, authentic leadership may serve as a critical protective factor helps to preserve cognitive energy and reduce exit intentions. Thus, in alignment with COR theory and the need to understand boundary conditions, we propose:

**H3: Authentic leadership moderates the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention, such that effect is weaker when authentic leadership is high.**

**Research Model**

Figure 2.1: Impact of workplace bullying on turnover intention, mediating role of cognitive weariness and moderating Role of authentic leadership



**Methodology**

Data was collected through a questionnaire from public service sector organizations in Pakistan. A field survey was designed and disseminated to employees working in various public sector organizations, which included government departments, public healthcare institutions, and educational organizations. As English is the official language of Pakistan and the majority of people can easily read and speak English, the questionnaire was

administered in English. Past researchers did not face any language-related issues while collecting data (Rasheed et al., 2017). Convenience sampling technique was used to maximize responses. Data were collected in three time lags, with an interval of one week each to avoid response bias. Data for workplace bullying (IV) and turnover intention (DV) were taken at time 1. Data for cognitive weariness (mediator) were collected at time 2. Data for authentic leadership (moderator) were collected at

time 3. A total of 320 questionnaires were distributed, and 260 completed responses were received across the entire time lag. The respondents of this study comprised 58% males and 42% females. Most respondents had a master’s degree as their highest qualification (70%) and were entry-level managers (37.6%). Additionally, quite a few participants held mid-level managerial positions (37.3%). On average, the participants were 31.18 years old (SD = 6.83), had spent 6.6 years working at their present company (SD = 6.14), and had 8.32 years of total working experience (SD = 6.84). Most respondents had a one-year working experience in the current organization.

**Measures**

A survey consisting of 24 items was used to collect data from the study participants. All items in this study were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “Strongly disagree” to 5 = “Strongly agree.” Workplace Bullying (WB) was measured using a six-item scale adapted from Einarsen et al. (2009), which captures employees’ exposure to repeated negative behaviors in the workplace. Sample items include “I was ignored or excluded,” “I was subjected to repeated reminders of my errors or mistakes,” and “I was humiliated or ridiculed in

connection with my work.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .910. Cognitive Weariness (CW) was assessed using a five-item subscale of the Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure (Shirom, 2003), which reflects mental fatigue and difficulty concentrating due to prolonged stress. Sample items include “I feel I am not thinking clearly at work,” “I find it hard to concentrate during my work tasks,” and “My thinking process is slower than usual while working,” with a Cronbach’s alpha of .810. Turnover Intention (TI) was measured using a six-item scale adapted from Kelloway et al. (1999), capturing the extent to which employees are considering leaving their organization. Sample items include “I am seriously thinking about quitting my job,” “I will probably look for a new job soon,” and “I often think about leaving this organization.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .830. Authentic Leadership (AL) was measured using a seven-item scale developed by Walumbwa et al. (2008), which evaluates a leader’s transparency, ethical behavior, and self-awareness. Sample items include “My supervisor encourages everyone to speak their mind,” “My supervisor demonstrates beliefs that are consistent with actions,” and “My supervisor shows he or she understands how specific actions impact others.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .764.

**Results and findings**

*Table: 1*

*Demographic, Means, Standard Deviations, correlations, and reliabilities*

		Mean	SD	WB	CW	AL	TI
1	WB	4.12	0.59	1			
2	CW	3.89	0.63	0.54**	1		
3	TI	3.68	0.51	-.033**	-.036**	1	
4	AL	3.95	0.57	0.50**	0.48**	-.037**	1

Note. N = 270; WB = Workplace Bullying; CW = Cognitive Weariness; AL = Authentic Leadership; TI = Turnover Intention.

SD = Standard Deviation; \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01.

According to the demographic data, a majority of respondents are male (68.7%), and the largest age group is between 30 to 40 years (54.3%). In terms of education, most participants hold a master’s degree (60.2%), followed by a bachelor’s degree (25.6%) and PhD (14.2%). Additionally, the highest portion of respondents (48.1%) reported having between 6 to 10 years of work experience. This demographic

profile presents a diverse range of academic and professional backgrounds of participants working in the public service sector. Descriptive statistics and correlations for the main study variables Workplace Bullying (WB), Cognitive Weariness (CW), Authentic Leadership (AL), and Turnover Intention (TI) have been presented in the table (2.1). Mean values range from 3.68 to 4.12, and standard deviations range from 0.51 to 0.63. The reliability of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, and all constructs demonstrated good internal consistency: Workplace Bullying ( $\alpha =$

0.84), Cognitive Weariness ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ), Authentic Leadership ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ), and Turnover Intention ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ).

The correlation matrix indicates a strong positive relationship between workplace bullying and cognitive weariness ( $r = 0.54, p < .01$ ), as well as between workplace bullying and turnover intention ( $r = 0.50, p < .01$ ). Furthermore, cognitive weariness

is positively correlated with turnover intention ( $r = 0.48, p < .01$ ), while authentic leadership is negatively correlated with all three variables. These findings suggest that bullying in the workplace is strongly associated with increased cognitive exhaustion and intentions to leave, whereas authentic leadership may buffer against these negative outcomes.

**Mediation Analysis**

**Table: 2**

Effect	Effect Size	S.E	t	p	LL 95% CI	UL 95% CI
Total Effect	.41	.06	6.83	.00	.29	.53
Direct Effect	.25	.05	4.46	.00	.13	.37
Indirect Effect	.16	.04	-	-	.08	.25

S.E = standard error, LL = lower limit, UL = upper limit, CI= confidence interval

Mediation analysis was conducted using the bootstrapping method with 5000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval, following Preacher and Hayes (2008). Results are presented in Table 2. The total effect of workplace bullying on turnover intention is 0.41, with LLCI = 0.29 and ULCI = 0.53, confirming a significant total effect. The direct effect

of workplace bullying on turnover intention remains significant at 0.25 (LLCI = 0.13, ULCI = 0.37). The indirect effect through cognitive weariness is 0.16, and the confidence interval (LLCI = 0.08, ULCI = 0.25) does not contain zero, confirming a significant mediation effect. These results support Hypotheses 1 and 2, indicating that cognitive weariness partially mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention.

**Moderation Analysis**

**Table: 3**

Variables	B	S.E	T	P	LL 95% CI	UL 95% CI
Constant	.39	1.42	.28	.78	-2.41	3.19
WB×AL→ CW	-.18	.09	-.2	.45	-.29	-0.07

Note. N = 270; WB = Workplace Bullying; AL = Authentic Leadership; CW= Cognitive Weariness S.E. = Standard Error; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit; CI = Confidence Interval.

To examine whether Authentic Leadership moderates the relationship between Workplace Bullying and Cognitive Weariness, a moderation analysis was conducted following Preacher and Hayes (2008), using a bootstrapping approach with 5000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals.

As shown in Table 3, the interaction term (Workplace Bullying × Authentic Leadership) was statistically significant ( $B = -0.18, p < .01$ ), and the confidence interval does not include zero (LLCI = -0.29, ULCI = -0.07). These results indicate that Authentic Leadership significantly moderates the effect of Workplace Bullying on Cognitive Weariness.

Specifically, the negative coefficient of the interaction term suggests that higher levels of Authentic Leadership weaken the positive relationship between Workplace Bullying and Cognitive Weariness. In other words, when leaders behaves as authentic leaders, the harmful impact of bullying on employees’ mental exhaustion is reduced. This finding also supports third hypothesis.

**Discussion**

Specifically, the current study have investigated the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention in the public service sector, considering cognitive weariness as a mediating mechanism and authentic leadership as a buffering moderating factor. This study contributes to a better understanding of how bullying predicts negative employee outcomes. The findings of this

study offer valuable contribution to identify the core mechanisms that bullying triggers into negative employee impacts. Workplace bullying significantly increased employees' intentions to leave their organization consistent with earlier findings. Such result contributes to the existing literature on this topic, that continued exposure to bullying exhausts emotional and psychological resources, resulting in employee partially withdrawing as a coping strategy (Einarsen et al., 2020). In the context of public service, where employee stability and continuity are critical, the detrimental effects of bullying become even more concerning. The public sector often demands high emotional labor and ethical responsibility; thus, toxic workplace experiences may directly erode employees' motivation and commitment to remain.

The public service domain, where continuity and stability of employees are the most important to retain whatever knowledge they have, the harmful impacts of bullying are being progressively addressed. In the public sector, this high emotional labor and ethical responsibility mean that toxic experiences cannot directly undermine employees' motivation and retention. Cognitive weariness, including mental fatigue, low focus, and emotional drain, are psychological consequence of bullying (Zhang et al., 2023). Employees working in public service settings are compelled to face complexities in their decisions and has to engage with a diverse range of stakeholders; therefore, when mental resources are exhausted as a result of bullying, fatigue becomes one of the main predictors of turnover intentions. It also supports the notion that turnover is not only attributable to a behavioral outcome but also emotional accumulation experienced over the years. The research identifies authentic leadership as a key moderator that influences the indirect relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention through cognitive weariness. Authentic leaders show transparency in ethical behavior while making balanced decisions, reduces the negative effects of bullying on mental exhaustion and employee turnover. This research adds to existing leadership research which emphasizes how authentic leadership acts as a protective and restorative force for employee well-being (Rego et al., 2012). Authentic leaders can build trust and resilience within public service

organizations that are typically bureaucratic and hierarchical regardless of workplace challenges.

### Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study offers several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it enriches the existing literature on authentic leadership, workplace bullying, cognitive weariness, and turnover intentions within the context of Pakistan's public sector. Unlike prior research predominantly focused on private sector organizations, this study emphasizes the unique dynamics of public institutions, where bureaucratic structures and political influences are prevalent. The findings suggest that authentic leadership, characterized by self-awareness, transparency, and ethical conduct, plays a crucial role in creating a supportive environment that mitigates the harmful effects of workplace bullying. This aligns with recent studies indicating that authentic leadership negatively correlates with workplace bullying and positively influences organizational health (Al-Romeedy & Khairy, 2024).

Practically, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers, public sector managers, and human resource professionals aiming to enhance employee well-being and retention. Implementing leadership development programs that cultivate authentic leadership qualities can be instrumental in reducing workplace bullying incidents and their associated negative outcomes. Additionally, organizations should establish clear anti-bullying policies and support systems to address and prevent bullying behaviors effectively. By fostering an organizational culture that promotes authenticity and ethical leadership, public sector institutions can enhance employee engagement, reduce cognitive weariness, and lower turnover rates.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides important contributions, it also has limitations. First, the cross-sectional designed study limits the ability to analyse the causal relationships among the variables. Future research should apply longitudinal designed study to better establish causality. Second, the study focuses only on the public sector in Pakistan, which limited the generalizability of the findings to other professionals sectors or cultural contexts. External validity of

results can be increased by replicating the study in different organizational settings and countries. Third, the reliance on self-reported data can support to common method bias. Future studies should use multi-source data, including peer and supervisors evaluations, to mitigate this concern. Additionally, as a moderating variable authentic leadership has been used, so we can also use other leadership styles as boundary conditions to analyses their effectiveness to mitigate adverse effects of workplace bullying. Finally, other positive mechanism can be used relating to employee health and psychological empowerment they can provide a more comprehensive understanding between workplace bullying and employee outcomes.

### Conclusion

In conclusion this study prevails the importance of authentic leadership in reducing the negative effects of workplace bullying on workers' cognitive weariness and turnover intentions in Pakistan's public sector. The results show that authentic leadership has a negative correlation with cognitive weariness and turnover intentions whereas workplace bullying has a positive correlation with these variables. Interestingly the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention is mediated by cognitive weariness, so bullying induced cognitive weariness plays a role in employees' intentions to leave their jobs. The negative effects of workplace bullying on cognitive weariness and resulting intentions to leave can be reduced by authentic leadership. These results support COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) by showing how authentic leadership can be like a curing instrument to help employees to overcome the negative effects of workplace bullying. These results support to the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) by explaining that how authentic leadership acts as a resource that helps employees to cope with the resource-draining experience of workplace bullying, thereby reducing cognitive weariness and turnover intentions. Furthermore, the study provides support to the COR theory hypothesis (Hobfoll, 1989), emphasizing the importance of authentic leadership as a vital environmental resource that assists workers in conserving and replenishing psychological resources. This shielding effect mitigates the adverse effects of

workplace bullying to employees' psychological well-being and urge to quit the firm.

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