



**Endgame by Jonathan Dahl**  
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# A Day of Reckoning for the Boss



**N**ote to managers of the world: you may be hearing a word from your team that you aren't quite used to—*no*.

From the great mind of Mark Royal, a senior director and expert on engagement for Korn Ferry, I've learned that early organizational theorists used to refer to a "zone of indifference" that occurs between managers and employees. The term characterizes how employees will routinely follow a manager's directions that come under the normal scope of the job. Indifferent to certain assignments, the worker doesn't question them. "Given today's environment," Royal says, "you can see how managers might feel that zone has shrunk a little."

Which is another way of saying that bosses may be noticing more employees standing up to them, in

both open and subtle ways. And the reason is obvious: with companies scrambling to fill roles at a remarkable rate, many workers feel more emboldened to look for new jobs and, as offers pour in, rethink some of the duties their managers dish out. There's also the fact that in the pandemic, companies that laid off sizable numbers asked people to take on multiple jobs. As more normal times return, those workloads will be questioned.

How far all this can go will certainly make managers nervous. Sure, the job market won't stay this way forever; but it's part of a manager's job to tell people what hours to work, what projects to focus on, which clients to prioritize. It's a fine line between employees saying they'd rather not do a project and simply refusing. What happens when that project is critical to the firm's overall strategy?

For his part, Royal says this is a good opportunity for managers to listen to workers and understand what any "no" is about. "The employees may be flexing their muscles when they're pushing back, but they might be offering constructive feedback," he says. As managers listen more, they may discover that an individual's goals are actually well aligned with the organization's.

As something of an experiment, I asked my team what they made of any shift in the balance of work power. One quipped that doubling salaries "would sure increase that zone of indifference." Another told me bosses needed to pick their battles better if they want to keep the truly talented staffers on staff and engaged. That sounds about right: in an era when up to 40 percent of the workforce says they're looking for jobs, the last thing any manager should be is indifferent. ▀

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