

## **Exit Interviews Yield Valuable, Sometimes Surprising Info**

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Your organization probably already has a defined process for conducting exit interviews. Perhaps you'll find some suggestions here that will allow you to improve your information gathering from employees who resign and even those who you have invited to leave.

I learned in a coaching conversation with a client that a respected individual had accepted a new job, one more fitting with the direction he wanted to take his career. I asked casually, "Who will be conducting his exit interview?" The person looked at me with surprise. "We don't do exit interviews."

The nature of our conversation immediately changed. I offered a crash course in the purpose of and method for conducting exit interviews. A day later, I provided the same guidance to the person who was to conduct the interview. The departing employee offered some surprising information. The insights have already afforded several organizational improvements.

Leaders find it hard to obtain helpful feedback. You'll never find a time when an employee is more willing to provide observations, however, than when he or she is leaving your organization. You may have been aggressive about seeking feedback from individuals in your organization, but people are willing to reveal far more information when they know there are no potential repercussions.

The person conducting the exit interview should have the reputation of being objective and fair. He or she needs to be a good listener and skilled at asking open-ended questions. It helps if the person is also a good note-taker and reporter of information.

The interview should be conducted in a neutral location without distractions or the potential for anyone overhearing the conversation. The interviewer should create as welcoming an environment as possible. Explain that the sole purpose of this conversation is to improve the quality of the employment experience for those individuals who remain with the organization.

This is NOT the time to encourage the individual to reconsider his or her decision to leave. If that is appropriate, it should be done well before this exit interview is started.

What questions should you ask? You can find many good examples simply by putting the words "Exit Interview" into any search engine. However, I'll offer a few that I think create the welcoming environment that will likely yield valuable and interesting information.

"In your entire relationship with our organization, what have we done well in serving you?" Be quick to ask follow-up questions if you think there is more insight to be gained.

When the energy diminishes, ask, "What could we do better in serving your team members who are remaining with us?" The person will likely index into some things that he or she wishes had been done differently with or for him or her. Don't argue or justify, simply record the information. Again, seek more details by specific questions when appropriate.

"What specifically did your manager and your teammates do well in supporting your ability to contribute?" Follow-up questions here might focus the person's attention on the expectations for the job, initial and subsequent training, performance reviews and other feedback provided, etc.

"What specifically could your manager and your teammates do differently to better serve each other?" Statistics show that the biggest reason employees leave is because of some habitual behavior of the manager. Information the individual never shared beyond a best friend is likely to come forth in response to this question. Penetrate to seek as much specific information as you feel you can. Remind the individual that you will use appropriate discretion in handling what you learn.

You'll add your own questions that are relevant to your culture. I encourage you to experiment. Remember, your objective is to obtain insights that will help your leaders be more effective.

Now, what do you do with what you learned? There's a short-term and a longer-term answer to that question. In the short-term, you need to flesh out your notes so that they will make sense two years from now to someone who is not familiar with the individual and his or her situation. Also, in the unlikely event that the exiting employee files legal action against the company (or someone in the company), these notes could be a very vital piece of evidence to support the company. Or, these notes could become very damaging evidence against the company. So, the wording must meet the company's expectations regarding discriminatory language.

Once you have made your notes exceedingly clear, then you should provide the information to the right people as quickly as possible. I strongly encourage doing this in person, not by phone and especially not by e-mail. There will likely be some information that you have to handle carefully. What you've learned is worthless if the person who can make improvements ignores or discounts the information.

Make a note regarding with whom you shared the notes, how that person seemed to respond, and the date the information transfer occurred. File two copies of your notes. One goes into whatever will be retained as a personnel file for the exiting employee. The other goes into either a chronological or an alphabetical file of exit interviews, depending on how your organization has decided it wants to retrieve the information at some future time.

Obviously, some judgment is required for every exit interview. What can you ask? How deeply can you penetrate? How credible is the information you are being given? Then later, you'll have to decide what information you share with whom. You may find that one or more individuals will want your help to improve his or her behaviors and perspectives.

It's hard for leaders to obtain feedback from their organizations. Look on the "Article Archives" page of my website alphabetically for the article "Why You Don't Find Out What You Need to Know." When a person is leaving your employment is a great time to obtain valuable information. Establish a robust process for conducting exit interviews and use the information you obtain to improve!

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