

Getting the Most from Exit Interviews

Learning that you are losing a valued employee is always disappointing. The first line of defense is to make your best effort to retain them, but once their decision to leave is final, move on – and turn your attention to conducting a well-run exit interview.

Exit interviews can be eye-opening since departing employees have less at stake and are often willing to provide some of the most honest and useful feedback you will ever receive.

You may think that you have people in your organization who tell it to you straight, but even the best, most loyal employees factor the potential exposure it could create for them when considering what to tell you. This is just a reality of the employee/employer dynamic, but that dynamic can shift significantly once someone has made up their mind to leave. Here are a few tips for getting the most from a departing employee:

Create the right environment

The useful candor described above doesn't happen automatically. Facilitate the gathering of honest feedback by making the environment comfortable for the departing employee. Consider the location of the interview, who will be in attendance, and the timing. Off-site locations can be good, perhaps over lunch, and whenever possible, the departing employee's immediate supervisor should not be at the meeting. Budget enough time and make sure the employee doesn't feel rushed. If they don't think that talking to them is a high priority for you, they will be less inclined to provide useful information.

Check your emotions at the door

You are there to learn, not for your final chance to get something off your chest or to make sure the employee understands your perspective on what went wrong. It no longer matters, and this type of confrontation is counterproductive to getting the most you can from the interview.

Make sure employees feel heard and appreciated during their exit interview

They may not have always felt that way while working for you, and a positive final experience in which they feel appreciated can create a lot of good will – including a willingness on their part to recommend your company to other prospective employees.

Be open to hearing things you may not like

Exit interviews aren't for thin-skinned managers. You can hear nice things about yourself and your company anytime from the employees who still want to keep their jobs. Exit interviews can be about getting an uncomfortable perspective – and being able to hear it. Before you dismiss any of their input, remember that they probably aren't *completely* wrong. What part is right and how can you use it?

Ask thoughtful questions

It's easy to come to an exit interview under-prepared and open with something like, "So, what's up?" but that won't solicit much useful input. Rather, develop a list of questions for departing employees that address issues that are important to your company and its culture. Some questions can be worded to solicit a direct response, others just to get employees talking, but they should by no means be limited to why they are leaving. Here are a few suggestions:

1. What aspects of our operation do you think work particularly well?
2. What areas of our operation need work?
3. What was the most frustrating thing about working here?
4. Was there anything we could have done to keep you from leaving (this is an inquiry only; make it clear that you are not trying to convince them to stay)
5. What do you think our clients like best about us, what do they like least? (I particularly like this question. I have found that departing employees tend to be quite willing to share their take on the client's point of view – which can be very valuable)
6. Was the job what we told you it would be when you initially interviewed for the position?
7. Was there anyone in particular who was a mentor or strong positive role model for you here? (Don't miss the opportunity to pass this compliment along to the appropriate person – and their manager)
8. Was there anyone in particular who contributed to your leaving?
9. How challenged were you here?

Use the information

The information from even a well-conducted exit interview can get lost in the shuffle of the employee's departure and the subsequent distraction of hiring a replacement. Overcome this by creating a system for reviewing and integrating information you receive. Start by routinely scheduling postmortem meetings to review actionable information that is collected during exit interviews.

The primary time to benefit from any employee's contribution is, of course, while they are working for you, but the exit interview is an important final opportunity to benefit from their participation – and it should not be overlooked.

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