

An Exit Interview is an Opportunity to Learn

They say people are known for the company they keep. Well, the reverse is also true: companies are known for the people they keep. All too often companies let the really good ones slip through their fingers. Perhaps even more troubling is that they can't, or won't, admit the reasons. Good, highly-motivated people are the key to running your business. You spend a lot of time and energy recruiting, training and developing your staff. If and when they leave, you lose that investment and, more importantly, the promise of their future contribution to your success.

Whether someone is leaving for more money, more challenge, or just to sail around the world, you need to fully understand their reasons. That is, assuming you are interested in improving your company, your department and your own personal management style. And assuming you want to keep other employees leaving too. Exit interviews are designed to elicit that information.

Properly done, picking the mind of a departing employee will reveal a gold mine of insights about your corporate environment, working relationships and how your business could improve. You wouldn't pay a consultant to analyze your operation and then send them on their merry way without listening to their advice. Don't do it with your employees either.

The goal of the exit interview is to shine a light on any specific work, performance or morale issues that you should target for improvement. But odds are you won't get that far unless your corporate culture has encouraged free, honest and open communication from the first day of employment until the last. Trying to start that dialogue on someone's final day will not work. Although being their final day, they may be more apt to open up.

Also, don't start asking questions if you're not prepared to hear the answers or to do something about them. For instance, don't be surprised when you hear the number one reason people leave is poor management and lack of challenge or excitement. Too many companies ask a few obligatory questions when a worker leaves and then do nothing with the information. Don't waste your time if that's the case. You should have a system to communicate the results to managers and key employees and use the information to influence job content, policies and training.

Interview every person who leaves, not just the good employees. Everyone has insights that may prove valuable to running your business. Keep perspective and avoid overreacting. One exit interview does not make the truth. There will always be personality clashes that occur between the manager and the managed. But if you see a trend in why people are leaving, then don't bury your head in the sand. Look for patterns. For instance, if a number of people have left the same department, that could indicate you have the wrong manager in place and you need to take some action.

Remember, don't take it personally. In today's mobile job environment, employees come and employees go through no fault of your own. Still, anyone that has worked for you has some ideas about how you can improve.

Develop forms aimed at uncovering good information. Ask open-ended questions that drill down beyond the obvious and give you honest feedback you can work with. Make sure the employee is aware that anything said during the interview will not be used against them in future references.

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