

THE EXIT INTERVIEW: ALWAYS USEFUL, OFTEN REVEALING

It has been my experience that very few employers conduct meaningful exit interviews. Why? Many managers say they're too busy, others think it's a waste of time. The fact is most managers won't admit the primary reason is to avoid conflict, opening up old wounds, or worse still, being confronted by hostility.

This reasoning is unfounded, because a well-conducted exit interview won't create a forum for debate or the outletting of anger. The fact is that this interview provides management with important information that can't be obtained through other methods relative to their company, internal structure and management in general.

According to a survey of 241 FORTUNE 500 companies, exit interviews revealed the following valuable information:

- Conditions which influenced other workers and which could be corrected
- Ways of improving staff morale
- Information as to why some managers retained a greater number of their Associates than others
- Salary and benefits information on other Retailers
- What employees thought about working conditions

Some companies use what is referred to as the structured exit interview, where the employee answers a series of concisely stated questions directed to eliciting yes or no responses. Its downside is that it comes across more as an interrogation than interactive session. Others use an unstructured technique with open-ended questions that don't allow the Interviewer a great deal of control in the meeting. The third alternative combines the strengths of both techniques, while minimizing their weaknesses.

A highly effective exit interview allows the departing employee to tell the real termination reason openly and freely, but within parameters defined and controlled by the Manager. This interview technique incorporates a number of elements that allow the interviewer to follow up on interesting subjects and probe for further information. These include:

- Developing rapport at the outset of the meeting
- Stating the purpose of the exit interview
- Exploring attitudes toward the job being left and reasons for leaving
- The individual's recommended changes for other employees
- Concluding the interview with thanks given for their feedback

Wherever possible, a human resources team member should conduct the exit interview because of their perceived objectivity. They are usually more successful in extracting details from a former employee than will an immediate supervisor.

This type of meeting must be conducted in a closed-door office, with no telephone calls or other interruptions. Some senior exit interviews take place over lunch, but this environment is far less effective due to the loss of privacy.

You may want to open the meeting with non-threatening reporting of the past (tenure with the company, past positions, etc.), leading up to the present position to allow more sensitive questions to be asked later. The interviewer should ask comprehensive and open-ended questions which encourage free response, yet within the limits set by the interviewer, especially pertaining to general job factors and personal attitudes. An example of this might be "Let's talk about to what degree you feel you were given the opportunity to use your skills and education on the job"; this will allow the interviewee to comment on perceived company weaknesses.

Personal attitudes will be revealed by a question such as "Tell me about the amount of personal recognition you received on your job performance and how many of your ideas or suggestions were acted upon."

After these areas have been explored, a natural transition question to another topic would be, "let's move on and talk a little about the things that actually prompted you to consider leaving." Most important, an opportunity should be provided for the interviewee to provide suggestions concerning the job or company. This area is a wealth of information, and a company can, over a number of exit interviews, start to establish patterns for employee dissatisfaction and work on their resolution.

Remember that the exit interview is an aid to both management and the employee. It can help management better understand their environment from the employees' perspective, reduce turnover, and help the individual leave with a better attitude toward their former employer. Don't sell this process short...it's worth the time invested.

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