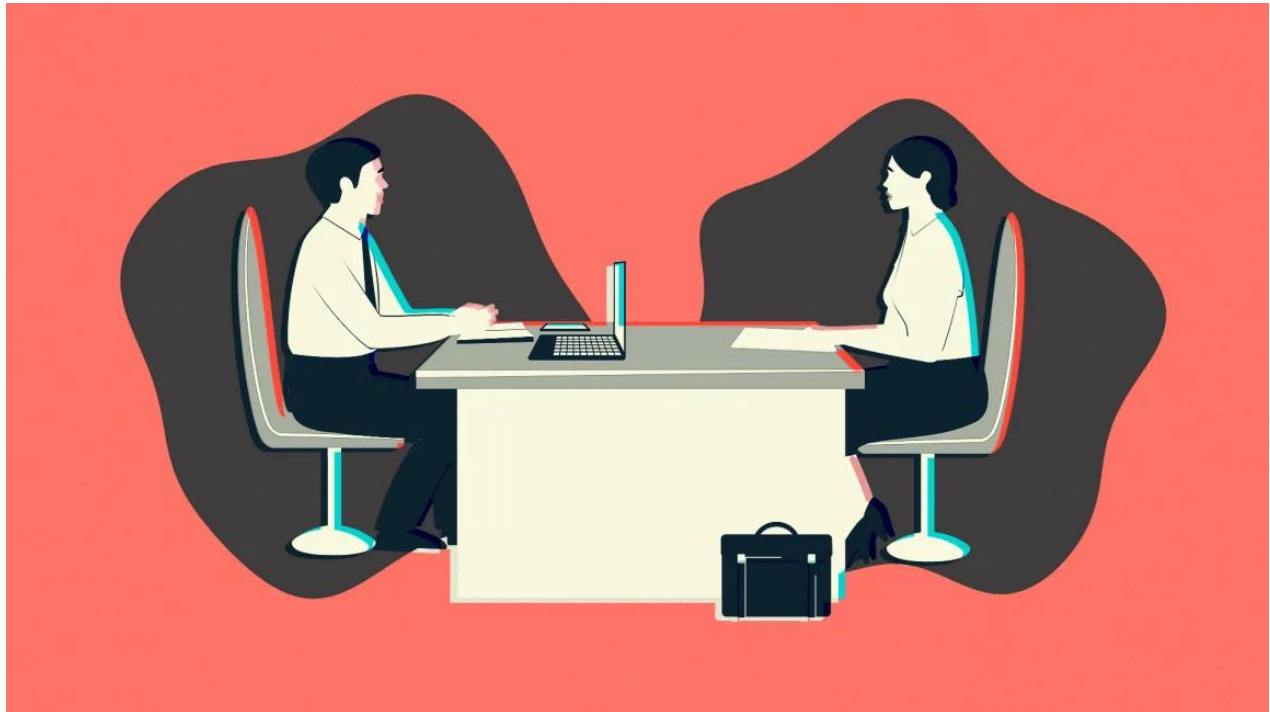


How To Conduct a ‘Stay’ Interview With Your Employees, and Why You Should

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[Source illustration: Natalia Smuriakova/Getty Images]

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Although organizations have been obsessing over the “war for talent” for two decades, it is surprising how often they will end up losing valuable employees for avoidable reasons, such as not knowing they are disengaged and open to other opportunities. A familiar outcome of this cycle has employers trying to match or improve their competitor’s offer to retain the employee, only to realize it is too little, too late. Current concerns about the Great Resignation have no doubt increased managers’ fear of losing valuable employees in a tight talent market.

A powerful, yet underutilized tool to avoid finding yourself in this situation is to conduct a “stay” interview. This is a brief, individual conversation with your employees aimed at knowing what makes them want to stay, and what may actually cause them to leave. Think about it as the reverse of the exit interview, in which the goal is to construct a

post-mortem explanation of why someone left, and what you *could have done* to avoid it.

One reason stay interviews are useful is that they provide some structure and a formal process for checking in with your employees. This helps organizations nurture manager-employee conversations, and reduce the probability that a boss is unaware of their employee's plans, thoughts, and motivation. While organizations often try to address this with employee engagement surveys, these are generally anonymous at the individual level, so only useful to identify collective trends. Besides, the correlation between engagement and turnover is much lower than people tend to assume, according to the best meta-analytic study.

Even if organizations do not impose it, it's extremely advantageous for managers to conduct stay interviews. These may not always deter someone from leaving, but they will likely improve managers' understanding of what their teams like and dislike, which should help them retain *other* valuable people.

While there are no clear-cut rules on how to conduct a perfect stay interview, data-driven recommendations tend to agree on the following points:

They should be private, one-on-one meetings, which state very clearly that the intention is to discuss an employee's reason for *staying*, and therefore different from regular, task-related, work meetings.

They should be conducted with *all* team members, in order to avoid the perception that managers care only about certain employees, and that not being interviewed means not being valued.

Questions should always be clearly related to exploring the aspects of the job, role, and career that drive employees' decision to stay. This means framing the discussion around positive talking points: "I would like to get a better sense of what excites you/keeps you interested/motivates you to stay with us." Examples of questions to ask can include:

1. What do you like most about working here?
2. What do you look forward to when you are getting ready for work?
3. What do you like most about our culture?
4. What would make a long-term career with us enticing for you?

They should explore opportunities for improving even if positive themes on *staying* dominate the conversation. This will require a minimum degree of psychological safety, so employees feel free to speak openly, without fearing negative repercussions. This also means managers should be grateful rather than defensive when they receive constructive feedback from employees. Examples of questions may include:

- What could make your job better?
- What could I do as a manager so you enjoy your work more?
- What would you do in my role to motivate the team more?
- Say, hypothetically, you decided to leave in the next two years—what would have caused you to leave?

Perhaps the most important recommendation to remember: Whatever insights you gather will be useless unless you are determined to *act* on them. This requires you to not just digest the findings of your stay interview, but also make an effort to reinforce what works, change what doesn't, and assess how your efforts are working out. Importantly, you don't need to do everything people tell you, but prioritize the requests from those you deem more valuable.

Last but not least, getting into the habit of conducting stay interviews will also improve your general communication with the team. Few things are more important for effective management than the ability to create open communication channels and candid and meaningful dialogue with employees. Most work problems—like most relationship problems—are caused by a failure to understand others. There's no better antidote to this than great communication.