

One Simple Change to Fix Exit Interviews

January 24, 2023

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Exit interviews are useful. To understand why people are leaving, get direct feedback from those departing.

There's just one problem - don't wait until people leave to have these conversations.

Understand and discuss frustrations before people leave, not after they've made their decision.

These discussions don't have to be formal. Nor does it have to be a high-pressure, high-stakes conversation. Just ask people about their issues and what they would like changed, especially as it compares to outside opportunities.

It's perplexing for leaders to wait until someone is walking out the door to learn. Learn while people are there. Make it a fluid, ongoing process. Exit interviews shouldn't be a one-time thing but a continuous dialogue over a person's career.

When employees feel like they must wait until they leave to voice issues, that's a problem. Many employees and employers don't want to talk about the obvious truth: people leave jobs. It's not uncommon, so get over it. Don't pretend it doesn't exist.

Both sides hold back because leaders don't want honest feedback and employees don't want to reveal they're a flight risk.

The responsibility falls on both the employee and leader. Employees need to speak up when they see an issue. Leaders need to ask about what they can do better. It's up to both sides to identify issues that are impacting employee performance. Don't wait until the relationship is broken to learn from it.

What are the issues that would cause you to leave? What are other companies doing better than us? What frustrations would you like removed? What are we doing that is uncompetitive or below market? These should be constant discussion points, even if not easily changed.

It's not always about change. Sometimes people just want to be heard and validated.

Honesty from both sides, no matter how painful, is the goal. The employee can say exactly what should be changed and what isn't up to standard. Likewise, the leader is equally empowered to say what concerns are legit, what concerns are unfounded, and where the employee is at fault.

The same idea applies to annual reviews. Don't wait until some year-end, check-the-box type meeting to tell employees what they could have done better 11 months ago.

Make feedback constant. Every week. Every month. Every quarter. But not once a year.

Delayed feedback would never be tolerated in other domains: athletics, music, chess, public speaking, etc. You'd never allow your coach or leader to give you feedback once per year. You wouldn't wait until you fired your coach to tell them what should be changed or what's not working. You'd want feedback at every interaction, every day. And likewise, you'd provide the same feedback to the coach. It's an open and fluid conversation. It's a continuous evolution, not a discrete, one-time change.

Stop waiting until good people leave to improve.