

Conversations and Stay Interviews are the Work of a Leader

I recently conducted a few exit interviews for clients, asking people about their reasons for leaving. What did they value about the organization? What advice would they offer that could benefit the organization? What would they like to see changed, if they were to want to come back? I asked these and other similar questions to help them reflect on lessons learned, and to help inform senior management about specific ways to seek continuous improvement.

Striving for continuous improvement is critical to the success of organizational culture. It requires humility coupled with inner-confidence: "We're good, and we must always try to be better." Some people and some companies simply do not seem to want to change. Change requires awareness and effort, yes, but it is often the catalyst for significant growth and progress.

How often do we hear that a person who has left a company was not really that good, he's no loss? Just last month, I heard about a guy who headed sales; he was with his company for 17 years. His exit interview was perfunctory. It went right into a file, read only by HR. Senior management showed no interest.

Fortunately, the companies and organizations that I work with have the opposite attitude: they want to know what they are doing well and what they can do better. They realize that having their team members engaged and excited about their work and their company means better service to clients, improved productivity, lower turnover and better long term financial results.

As I was prepping for one of the exit interviews, I came across the phrase "stay interview." That was new to me. I read about it, loved the idea, and subsequently wrote a few short papers about it. (See [Common Sense Leadership Ideas & Advice](#), my papers dated January 7, 14 and 22 of 2013.)

To my absolute delight, four clients contacted me, said that the stay interview is a great idea, and told me that they have in fact implemented stay interviews in their companies. Great news!

Yet, I'd like to add some caution and insight.

First of all, I totally encourage leaders to have conversations with their team members. Yet, when speaking with a client recently about the importance of such conversations, she said "You're right, John, I am going to try schedule monthly lunches or at least meetings with my team members." My reaction was, "No, have these conversations each quarter, track them so you know you're having them, but make them more spontaneous." Too often I hear, "Oh, it's the second Tuesday of the month, I have to meet with my boss." It's an obligation that feels more like a performance review, which everyone hates, the boss and his or her report alike.

Far better for the boss to say, “Hey, I’d like to catch up on how you’re doing, hear your ideas, see if I can help. Let’s have coffee or lunch next week.”

I think this approach shows appreciation and willingness versus duty. And that effort will certainly be valued by the team member, which is critically important. 75% of people leave their jobs because they do not feel appreciated. That is striking to me! Turnover is so easily averted by simply reaching out to have brief, purposeful conversations.

The stay interview is one of the most important conversations we can have with our valued team members. It is a very positive approach to keeping our good people, and we gain key insights, ideas and advice which we can definitely use as we continue to strive for improvement. In essence, a stay interview is saying to a person, “We appreciate your good work and dedication, you are an important member of our team and we would like to learn from you.”

In summary, the stay interview includes such questions as:

- What do you value about your work? Our company?
- What gives you a sense of satisfaction? Significance?
- How could we help you better use your skills?
- How could we improve productivity?
- How could we improve communication?
- What is missing here?
- What questions would you ask senior management?

These are sample questions, and they are good ones. Your organization will have its own questions to add. And I don’t think you should simply delegate stay interviews to HR, which happened to one of my clients. Yes, it’s great that the CEO loved the idea of stay interviews, but he thought it was HR’s responsibility and so he assigned it to them. Why? He “didn’t have time for it.”

Know that conversations are the work of a leader. I’m borrowing this excellent phrase from the book, *Fierce Conversations* by Susan Scott. Yes, they are. These conversations mean so much to team members. Yes it’s a challenge today to make the time for them, with the endless flow of emails coming at us and other incessant demands on our time.

The solution, not an easy one, is that leaders must spend less time in meetings and more time out of their offices, conversing with their people who are actually doing the work, and not just with colleagues in the C-suites.

Best case scenario, senior managers periodically have stay interviews, ask their people what’s going well, ask for ideas, and let them know how appreciated they are. Done well, stay interviews will fully engage our people and generate positive energy in the workplace and respect for our senior managers.

That’s worth striving for!

About The Author



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