

This Way to the Exit Interview

By Ken Gaffey

A custom or tradition is often accompanied by a ceremony that can trace its origins to the early days of a culture, tribe, or family. During Thanksgiving my father and I would be given the wings off the turkey fresh out of the oven (pre-Butterball, not self basting, with no pop-up temperature probe, when every year there was a risk of a dry, overcooked bird).

We would sit at the kitchen table, devour the wings, and pronounce the "bird" was well cooked, moist and delicious (as true men and boys of the '50s and '60s, this was pretty much the sum total of our contribution to preparing the feast). As unimportant, unnecessary and unneeded as this custom was, we did it every year and we looked forward to it. Without the "wing ceremony" it just wasn't Thanksgiving.

Actually, the wing ceremony kind of reminds me of the average exit interview. It's a ritual that has survived the ages despite the questionable contribution it makes to the overall wellness of the company. But it just doesn't feel like a resignation without an exit interview! Some of my issues with typical exit interviews procedures include:

- They are usually among the last steps on an employee's last day. Do you really think the candidate is going to invest real time in the interview when the alternative is giving quick, empty answers so they can get on their way to the nearest restaurant for their going-away party?
- Most HR/staffing professionals begin the interview with the highly suspect promise, "This information will remain confidential." (Yeah, sure. I leave on Friday and on Monday my old boss is in your office responding to anonymous complaints from an ex-employee. Duh! I wonder who that could have been?)
- The data is more likely to contain the "why I'm taking this particular new job" data and not the "why I started looking in the first place" data that could actually do some good in fixing a retention issue. Most employees will focus on the final reasons they decided to leave, not the nagging problems that pushed them to consider a move in the first place.
- Many times exiting employees have an "I saved myself" attitude. They assume that, now that they are leaving, fixing your problems does them absolutely no good. Maybe if "you" had done a better job, they wouldn't have to leave. Feigned interest and inaccurate comments to support your exit efforts can be a form of revenge on "the system."
- On more than one occasion, I have heard an HR/staffing professional start an exit interview by saying, "I know nobody wants to burn bridges, but..." (there's that pesky "but" word again!). If you're going to try to have a successful exit interview, it's not really good headwork to remind them of the burning bridges cliché. Why not just invite their manager to sit in the office with you, or use a lie detector? If you feel the need for an old-fashioned, last day, face-to-face exit interview, at least don't go out of

your way to make it less likely to succeed. Accentuate the positive: "I appreciate your willingness to be open and frank with me, and I assure you it has a real and useful purpose."

- Many exit interview questions are written or asked as much to confirm a suspicion as to discover unknowns. (Question: "Now I know most people leave jobs for money, is that your reason too?" Answer: "Ah, sure, why not!")
- Since we already suspect the quality of exit data, we often resort to "filtering" the data. But how do you filter questionable data with an unbiased attitude if you require that the data should support your own beliefs as proof of its accuracy? If you delete 20% of the best comments and 20% of the worst comments, a typical filter concept, then your exit data will contain the secret of retaining average employees. (Yippee!)
- Many exiting employees know that their new employer will probably call their current employer anytime after they give their notice. After all, don't most applications caution that the offer is based on accurate information and that, in the event of an unsatisfactory reference check, the new employer reserves the right to withdraw their offer of employment? With that "Sword of Damocles" hanging over their head, do you really expect to hear honest, frank, and candid comments from a person still afraid of the reference they will get from you or their past manager? ("Looks like a great day to shoot myself in the foot!" Bang!)

If your real goal is to "punish" an exiting employee through a relatively meaningless exercise that has little or no substantive purpose, because you already have a biased opinion as to why they or other employees are leaving or already hold the data as suspect, then I can think of nothing better than an exit interview — especially if done in the style of many companies: face-to-face, on the last day of employment. It's a solid waste of two peoples' time that could result in misdirected or unsatisfactory policies based on the wrong data.

Truth is like gold: it's very hard to find, takes a lot of planning and digging, but is always worth the effort. It's no accident that the useless substance that sparkles like gold and is often found laying on the surface is referred to as "fool's gold."

If you want to know the truth about your company from your employees' perspectives in order to improve your retention, there are alternatives to traditional exit interviews, as well as ways to enhance and improve the traditional exit interview concept.

To make exit interviews more meaningful, any of the following may help:

1. Remove the intimidation of a "face-to-face" exit interview on the employee's last day. Issue the exiting employee a questionnaire the day they give notice with the request that it be turned in no later than their last day. Offer a "going away" cash bonus for submitting a complete exit interview.

Mail an exit interview form to exiting employees two weeks after they leave, with the offer of a noteworthy gift certificate if they invest the time to fill it in and return it promptly.

You won't get them all back, no matter what you try or offer. But isn't that a form of "filtering out" the disinterested, and isn't that the least critical data for you to consider? The bonus is an incentive, not a bribe. In business, if something is important, we are willing to pay for it. If it's not important, we don't pay for it. What message are you sending about "free exit data" to exiting employees? Is this just another form to be filled in, or data that may be used for a purpose? (Hey, I may be gone and derive no benefit from my input, but I could always use an extra \$100 for ten minutes work!)

2. Use a third party to conduct the interview if a face-to-face is required. The presence of an unknown and non-company representative often creates a believable aura of confidentiality and frees the exiting employee of the burden of their imagined and self-imposed self image. ("You won't believe me or anything I say," "Everybody thinks I'm a goof off," etc.)
3. Conduct exit interviews offsite. This should be done in a non-clinical environment, like a coffee shop or deli far enough away from the company to preclude employee traffic from intimidating the person being interviewed. Companies are like small planets with their own atmosphere — immersed in that environment, few people have the courage to speak freely. A small part of them would still be responding to the same artificial stimuli that had been affecting them negatively as an employee. As HR/Staffing pros, sitting in our offices or behind our desks, we are often looked on as vice principals, like it or not ("Shhh, here comes the teacher!"). So take it outside of "school."
4. Make it a published policy of the company not to release data from exit interviews in anything other than monthly or quarterly composite reports. Offer a signed copy of that policy to the exiting employee before you ask them to make comments. If employees know that their individual comments won't be quoted to their manager within hours of their departure, they may be more prone to tell the truth. Your data may age a few weeks, but it will be good data delivered later, not bad data delivered fast.
5. HR may want to track specific data to uncover and investigate potential management issues, but this should remain strictly confidential. Make sure you have a clear and enforced policy regarding confidentiality of information given to HR/staffing. If, for the last two years, an employee has heard snippets from exit interviews every time somebody has left the company, they have no reason to trust your promise of confidentiality on their big day. (No offense folks, but some of us in HR/staffing leak information like a screen door on a submarine. Get a hobby!)
6. Use standard questionnaires. Don't allow your preconceived notions to direct the exit interview or, even worse, create a "make it up as you go" atmosphere. ("Everybody knows you weren't happy here because of your manager, why was

that?" as opposed to, "Were you ever happy here as an employee, when and why, or why not?")

7. Be willing to probe past easy, glib answers. Dig! If it looks like you're merely going through the motions, so will the exiting employee. But as it becomes apparent that you aren't willing to accept fluff answers, the employee will probably stop giving them.
8. Beware of "dying declarations" and the value you place on them. As an officer of the company, it's your duty to report and take action anytime an employee reports a violation of company policy or state and federal employment laws. But often, in an exit interview, petty complaints and past grievances emerge and take on greater importance than they should. Based on the training you've given your line managers and the confidence you have in them to perform a delicate task, you may want to encourage them to have an informal meeting with an exiting employee before the formal exit interview.

This will offer the employee a chance to "speak their mind" to the manager. Advise the manager to consider it a learning experience, even if they don't agree with all the comments and criticisms. However, having had an opportunity to "heal" small wounds and exorcise the smaller demons, a well-directed exit interview with you may more successfully focus on more critical and substantive issues. If the issues they discussed with the manager were serious, they will still repeat them to you. If the issues were petty and not critical, the exercise will have been sufficient.

9. When compiling your data from exit interviews, remember that not all management environments are the same. Many line managers see their team only once or twice a day, while in other departments, they might be exposed to each other constantly. A good manager with constant contact with his or her employees may have a lot more negative mention in exit interviews than a bad manager whose daily contact is infrequent. Some departments are pressure cookers, while others are more tranquil. Judge the comments based on the environments. A great manager in a pressure cooker may be doing well to hold turnover at 30%. A poor manager in a tranquil environment may be a total failure but still maintain a 15% turnover.
10. Do not judge the source. The "bad employee" who nobody likes may have been made such by the environment they worked in. After all, on the day they were hired, everyone thought it would work out. Don't judge the employee; listen to their story and evaluate the data and the source separately. Be open to the fact that the former may have brought about the latter.

Think of it this way: an exit interview is like an autopsy. All you can discover is the cause of death for this particular patient. Potentially useful to prevent other such "fatalities" in the future, but too late for the person involved and others who may already be "infected." However, regular, ongoing check-ups and unlimited access to your "HR/Staffing MD," or their third-party representative, may prevent simple symptoms from ultimately becoming terminal.

So you can either focus on fixing and improving the way you find out why people are leaving when it's too late, or you can create a positive and interactive atmosphere among your existing employees by creating interesting, exciting, and profitable ways for them to tell you what will make them stay.

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