Guide to Stay Interviews

Introduction

A stay interview is a casual two-way conversation using structured questions a manager conducts with individual staff members to learn about them and what could strengthen their engagement and retention. These conversations identify and then reinforce the factors that drive the employee to stay and minimize “triggers” that might cause them to consider quitting according to human resources thought leader Dr. John Sullivan.

This tool isn’t only intended for top performers but can also be used with disengaged staff members and should especially be used for those who fall in between the two extremes, which is the majority of an organization (about 80%). Stay interviews are ongoing conversations where the answers to questions asked will prompt further discussion and action plans around areas such as: career advancement, learning and development opportunities, life/work alignment, managing conflict, and what the staff member wants and needs from their manager.

When to Hold Stay Interviews

Stay interviews should occur outside of the annual performance review and should not be used to bring performance concerns to the staff member’s attention for the first time. Below are suggestions to when to conduct stay interviews for current employees and new hires.

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<th>For Current Employees</th>
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<td>During planning or development conversations</td>
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<td>Periodically during regularly scheduled 1:1 meetings</td>
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<td>As a separate conversation, sharing the purpose in advance</td>
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<th>For New Hires</th>
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<td>After the person has been in the role about six months</td>
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<td>Again at one year and then as you would for current employees</td>
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Best Practices for Managers

Prior to the Conversation
- Introduce the purpose of the conversation to the staff member.
- Schedule a time and location for the conversation to take place, even if you are using an existing 1:1 meeting.
- Become familiar with interview and probing questions.
- Be ready to take notes.

During the Conversation
- Show genuine caring and curiosity.
- Actively listen. Hear what matters most to them, and let their answers drive the conversation.
- Anticipate responses and be prepared for possible hard-to-deliver requests.
  - Care enough to look into their request(s) and stand up for them
  - Tell the truth about any obstacles you may face in granting their request(s)
  - Ask, “What else?” and keep asking this question. You’ll eventually get something you can work with.
- Expect an answer may sometimes be “I don’t know.” They may be surprised by the question so give them time to think. You can return to the question later, even at another meeting.
- Be willing to say, “I don’t know but will find out the answer and get back to you.” or “I don’t know but let’s work together to find out the answer.”
- Begin to build a clear action plan in partnership with the staff member that addresses the things that are important to them. Both of you should have items within the plan you are responsible for with established timelines to keep the plan on track but also have a willingness to adjust the plan as needed.

After the Conversation
- Keep the conversation going and track progress. If you’re not address the things that are important to the employee, the conversation is meaningless.
- Don’t break trust. Follow up as your agreed. Care enough to support them.
- Take the time needed to collect information and solve a problem or frustration correctly. Don’t let the fear (or actual threat) of a staff member leaving drive you to a potentially incorrect action.

Traps to Avoid

Prior to the Conversation
- **Fearing Response** – you will not have all the answers nor the ability to grant all the staff member’s wishes but that doesn’t mean you should avoid certain questions; probing questions are key.
- **Bringing up hidden performance issues** – this is not when the staff member should hear for the first time that there are concerns with their performance.
- **Tipping the agenda** – the staff member’s answers to the questions drives the conversation, not what you want to talk about or what you think the staff member wants to talk about.
- **Not knowing company resources** – be familiar with employee-related policies, programs and procedures; your in-unit HR team is a great resource.
During the Conversation

- **Forcing the conversation** — remember, being genuine is key so be committed and don’t meet just to meet or because your peer is conducting these interviews and you feel guilty you haven’t had the opportunity to do so.
- **Conquering silence** — don’t force an answer for the sake of eliminating uncomfortable silence; if the staff member is struggling, let them know you can come back to the question later (during the same meeting or at a later meeting).
- **Losing focus** — keep listening and taking notes; you don’t want to give the staff member the impression they are not interesting enough to keep your attention.
- **Becoming defensive** — something you did or didn’t do as a manager may reveal itself during the conversation; show respect and ask probing questions; this isn’t an admission of guilt but rather, shows that you are interested in learning about their opinion.
- **Throwing the organization under the bus** — consciously or not, staff members will seek signals from you on whether the organization is on the right track and/or makes the right decisions for the good of all; while you do not have to agree with every decision that is made, if you do not generally believe the organization is being managed in the right way, then you need to address this with your manager, in-unit HR team or other appropriate outlet, not with the staff member.
- **Breaking trust** — be prepared to listen carefully, apologize when necessary and take strong supporting positions even when those decisions may not be popular.

After the Conversation

- **Dropping the ball** — keep the conversation going and track progress.

Questions to Ask

As mentioned above, being prepared for the conversation by becoming familiar with starter and probing questions is key. Below are examples from Richard P. Finnegan’s book *The Power of Stay Interviews for Engagement and Retention*.

**Question 1: What do you look forward to each day at work?**

Additional probes:
- Give me an example.
- Tell me more about...
- Who do you look forward to working with most?

**Question 2: What are you learning here, and what do you want to learn?**

Additional probes:
- Which other jobs here look attractive to you?
- What skills do you think are required for those jobs?
- What skills would you have to build to attain those jobs or some responsibilities of those jobs?

**Question 3: Why do you stay here?**

Additional probes:
- Tell me more about why that is so important to you.
- Is that the only reason you stay or are there others?
- If you narrowed your reasons to stay to just one, what would it be?

**Question 4: When is the last time you thought about leaving us, and what prompted it?**

Additional probes:
- Tell me more about how that happened. Who said what?
- What’s the single best thing I can do to make that better for you?
- How important is that to you now on a 1-10 scale?

**Question 5: What can I do to make your job better for you?**

Additional probes:
- Do I tell you when you do something well?
- Do I say and do things to help you do your job better?
Resources

References
- *Hello Stay Interviews, Goodbye Talent Loss: A Manager’s Playbook* (Kaye and Jordan-Evans, 2015)
- *The Stay Interview: A Manager’s Guide to Keeping the Best and Brightest* (Finnegan, 2015)

Additional Books, Articles, and Videos of Interest
- *Love ’Em or Lose ’Em, Getting Good People to Stay: Sixth Edition* (Kaye and Jordan-Evans, 2021)
- Article Link: [The Many Benefits that Come from Using Stay Interviews](#) by Dr. John Sullivan
- Article Link: Stay Interviews: [20 Possible Questions You Should Consider Asking](#) by Dr. John Sullivan
- Video Link: [The Stay Interview – Don’t Wait for Exit Interviews](#) by Dr. Beverly Kaye (4 minutes)
- Video Link: [Stay Interview Quick Byte](#) by Dr. Beverly Kaye (2.5 minutes)