Ask

Why save your questions for an exit interview?
Ask them now, and keep your stars.

From the authors of Love ‘Em or Lose ‘Em: Getting Good People to Stay, Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans

Consider a **Stay Interview** – Just **ASK**

What is the key to engaging and retaining talent -- the employees, knowledge workers, associates, technical specialists, and functional specialists who do the work and keep your company successful?

Many organizations spend a lot of time, effort, and money to uncover the answer. Yet, we notice that most of them overlook the obvious -- asking their employees what will keep them engaged and on the team. And what might lure them away.

Instead of an exit interview with a departing star, try a *stay interview* and prevent the exit!

**Ask - So You Don’t Have to Guess**

When we suggest that managers ask their people what would keep them, the reactions are often a mix: “You’ve got to be kidding?” “Isn’t that illegal?” “What if they want something I can’t give?”

Some managers dance around the subject for fear of putting people on the spot or putting ideas into their heads (as if their employees hadn’t thought of them on their own). Others fear these questions will raise more dust than they can settle and may encourage employees to expect answers and solutions that are out of managers’ hands. And then there are those who give another reason - time. They say their time is consumed by the business at hand - that there’s an urgency to succeed, leaving little or no time to listen, let alone ask.

Do you fall into any or all of these categories? If you do, you’re missing the secret of success in the engagement and retention battle.

**The How and the When**

There is no single way or time to ask. However, a likely time is during developmental or career discussions. (You do have them, don’t you?) In that context, you could simply ask: “What will keep you here? What might entice you away?” Listen actively to the answers you receive. Is it a chance to learn and grow, a promotion and big title, or something else? Don’t wait for a formal career discussion though. Take your treasured employees to lunch or coffee, for the express purpose of *asking*. 

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Beyond listening, you need to respond, and what you say is critical. Responses like “that’s unrealistic” immediately halt the dialogue and might even cause employees to go so far as to start a job search.

Asking has many positive side effects. The people you ask feel cared about, valued, and important, which often lead to stronger loyalty and commitment to you and the organization. In other words, just asking the question is a retention strategy.

What If You Can’t Give What They Want?

Some managers don’t ask because they fear they won’t be able to deliver on the request. If you can’t deliver, tell them the truth. But also tell them you’ll investigate the possibilities (if not now, then when?; if not this, then what?). Then ask, “What else?” Research shows clearly that people want more from work than just a paycheck. When you ask the question “What else?” we guarantee there will be at least one thing your talented employee wants that you can give. Remember to listen actively as your employees talk about what will keep them on your team or in your organization.

Why They Stay

We’ve asked over 17,000 people what keeps them in an organization “for a while.” The top few “stay factors” come up again and again, throughout every industry and at every level. In order of frequency, we’ve listed below the most common reasons people stay. (Please note that 91 percent of respondents listed at least one of the first two items among the top reasons they stay.)

1. Exciting work and challenge
2. Career growth, learning, and development
3. Working with great people
4. Fair pay
5. Supportive management/good boss
6. Being recognized, valued, and respected
7. Benefits
8. Meaningful work and making a difference
9. Pride in the organization, its mission, and its product
10. Great work environment and culture

Our Favorite “Stay Interview” Questions

- What about your job makes you jump out of bed in the morning?
- What makes you hit the snooze button?
- If you were to win the lottery and resign, what would you miss the most?
- What one thing that if changed in your current role, would make you consider moving on?
- If you had a magic wand, what would be the one thing you would change about this department?
- If you had to go back to a position in your past and stay for an extended period of time, which one would it be and why?
- What makes for a great day?
- What can we do to make your job more satisfying?
- What can we do to support your career goals?
- Do you get enough recognition?
- What will keep you here? What might entice you away?
- What do you want to learn this year? How might you learn it?
The Bottom Line

Stop guessing what will keep your stars happy. Gather your courage and conduct a stay interview with the employees you want to keep. Don’t guess and don’t assume they all want the same thing (like pay or promotion). Asking will not only make your talented people feel valued, but their answers will provide the information you need to customize strategies to keep each of them engaged and on your team.

It doesn’t matter so much where, when, or how you ask—just ASK!

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