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The value of the exit interview

by Geoff Mutton

Your senior technician just quit, but you don't know why.

He said he needed a change, but deep down, you know there is more to the story.

The business needs to know the truth and the way to achieve that is to conduct an exit interview.

What Is an exit interview?

An exit interview is a private conversation between a business representative and the departing staff member. The purpose is to discuss why the employee is leaving and the factors that contributed to this decision.

The employee's feedback can then be used to improve workshop operational processes for the benefit of remaining and future employees.

Why conduct an exit interview?

You can choose to skip the exit interview and just accept the reasons given. But you'd be missing a golden opportunity to gain valuable insights into how your staff feel about your workshop.

Effective exit interviews can uncover workshop problems that you never realised were there – problems that would still be around after this employee leaves. But once you know about the problems, you can address them and prevent more employees from quitting.

Who will conduct the exit interview?

The logical person to conduct the exit interview is the business owner. However the owner might be the worst person to do the job, because he or she may well be the reason for the staff quitting.

If the departing employee feels threatened, pressured, or otherwise tense they won't divulge the honest answers the business needs.

Perhaps more honest answers will be forthcoming if the interview is conducted by a business associate or third party.

Conduct the exit interview in a neutral, safe location and that excludes the lunchroom where everything can be overheard.

Keep the conversation casual

Start with a list of questions, but don't turn it into a full-on inquisition. Let the conversation flow naturally. The employee will tend to steer the conversation towards the topics that concern them most.

The interviewer's role is not to refute or support what the employee says, only to hear what they have to say. The employee should be encouraged to provide more detail and share what is foremost on their minds.

Explain the purpose of the exit interview

Explain the purpose of the exit interview to the departing employee right at the beginning of the interview.

State clearly that such interviews are intended to make positive changes and improve the workshop's culture.

Ask for honesty. If the real reasons are held back, the whole process will be a waste of time.

Stay professional

Employee departures are emotional events. It's a scenario that can quickly turn heated as the employee starts discussing sensitive topics, people, themselves, and even the interviewer.

The interviewer must stay impassive and calm during this conversation and not be baited into an argument. The interviewer is not there to be right, but simply to hear what the employee has to say. The information gathered can be used or discarded later.

In the same vein, encourage the employee to remain calm and try to help them stay focused on facts. Avoid letting the dialogue to slip into an exercise in bad-mouthing or name-calling. A best practice is to sprinkle the conversation with reminders that you appreciate their time and want them to get things off their chest, but your hope is to keep things professional during the airing of any grievances.

Remember the positive

An employee who has chosen to quit for company-related reasons will most certainly be sharing things they don't like about their job, their team members, or the workshop. But it doesn't *all* have to be negative. Don't forget to ask the employee what they did like about their stay and what they think the company can do to improve in the future. You'll be surprised how many great ideas they might have.

Sometimes it just does come down to the employee needing a change of environment and there's not much you can do to prevent this.

Some example questions to get you started

1. What did you like most about your job?
2. What did you dislike most about your job?
3. How would you describe your relationship with your supervisor?
4. How enjoyable was it to work with your colleagues?
5. Were you happy with your pay, benefits and other incentives?
6. What prompted you to start looking for another job?
7. What made you accept another job offer?
8. Would you recommend our workshop to a colleague as a great place to work?
9. What could be done to make this workshop a better place to work?

Summary

An exit interview is a uniquely valuable tool to help business owners grow a happier and more productive workshop. Done properly, the exit interview can provide insights that would be difficult or impossible to obtain by any other means. They can be stressful and emotionally charged, but highly rewarding if you handle yourself and the interview with a professional and objective mindset. Don't waste the chance to learn what is driving your best people away. Nip enough problems in the bud and watch your staff retention grow.

The place to start is www.tatbiz.net.au/capricorn

Just go for it!