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‘What’s our dumbest rule here?’ Ask smart questions in stay interviews

Wouldn't you have loved for every boss you ever had to ask you that question, just once, so you could raise an issue you might otherwise never have? Maybe such a discussion once a year would have made you feel like you were in a place where your opinions mattered and your voice was heard.

More than half of employees said that in their last three months on the job before they quit, no one talked to them about how they were feeling in their role, according to a new Gallup survey. And a new report by ResumeBuilder.com says about one quarter of workers are looking for a new job in 2022 to find better pay and benefits, remote work and working with a better supervisor.

This is where you step in.

Why aren't more companies using stay interviews?

A study done by outplacement services firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc. revealed that only 27 percent of companies conduct them, and an additional 24 percent are interested in

incorporating them.

Among those companies who have begun conducting them, statistics show that leaders who conduct regular stay interviews report lower turnover and higher morale.

The key to an effective stay interview is to avoid broad, open-ended questions that suddenly force employees into hazy, big-picture thinking. Questions like *How can I make this a great place for you?* and *How do you feel about your position?* just aren't specific enough. To those, you'll get answers like, "Oh, everything's pretty good overall..." Questions like, "What's the sight that makes you happiest here every day?" or "If you could offload one task, what would it be?" are better.

From there, you can work slowly up to their long-term goals. (A good question for that topic? "Pretend you own the place. What would be stop doing immediately, and what new division would you personally oversee?")

Schedule the interview in advance and let the employee know so they won't feel blindsided. And avoid topics such as to-dos and upcoming projects. Save that for a performance review.

Stay interviews might not lead to a perfect outcome, but they *will* build trust and improve engagement and retention among your employees.

Don't turn off that Zoom cam!

Do you secretly have the occasional negative thought about employees who keep their cameras turned off during conference calls? According to a new study by software company Vyopta, 92% of executives in medium-to-large firms say people who turn their video cameras off in team meetings won't last long.

To many, a shuttered webcam indicates someone not paying attention, distracted by other chores or family members, or just someone less engaged with work overall. In the survey, 43% of executives suspect employees who are off-camera are scrolling through websites or social media.

In this post-pandemic world, with many workers still enjoying remote or hybrid status, 96% of employers believe that remote workers are at a disadvantage compared to those who are on-site. But a mandatory "keep cameras on" rule may backfire, as employees need flexibility, especially when working remotely. Just like forcing people to come into the office, a dictate requiring "cameras on" might just push an employee to start thinking about working in a less intrusive environment elsewhere.

Some advice:

Try to be as explicit as possible about which meetings should be on- or off-camera. If it's a large "meet and greet" meeting, inform people ahead of time to prepare to have their cameras on.

If just a quick update on a project, consider using Slack, Teams, an email update or joint phone call. Zoom fatigue is burning out many workers who spend four or five hours looking into their computer screen and checking their appearance.

Difficult employee? Time for 'the chat'

Being an effective manager means confronting those "challenging" employees who, while typically good at their jobs, too often display unprofessional or downright obnoxious behavior. The best way to tackle such problems is to meet with employees right when you spot the problem behavior. When you sit down with the employee, describe the behaviors and tell the employee firmly that those behaviors must stop, using the D-I-S method:

Direct. Pinpoint the problem—don't beat around the bush. Too often, managers fail in their counseling efforts because they skip this basic, yet uncomfortable, step. Don't feel bad about being direct. Every manager has the right to demand that employees behave in a courteous and cooperative manner.

Immediate. Talk with employees right after you see (or hear about) offending behavior. That makes it harder for the employee to explain away your words.

Specific. Explain concrete examples of the employee's actions, how they affect co-workers and the consequences. A vague accusation like, "We hear you're being rude to co-workers," isn't as effective as, "Telling Mary her haircut looks like a rat's nest won't be tolerated."

Make sure the employee understands the negative impact of his behavior on morale, productivity, etc. Gain agreement with the employee that a problem exists. And discuss the consequences if the problem continues. Don't let such a meeting end without deciding on the best course of action.

Managing the Google way

Google, the king of search engines, recently set out on a search of its own—to identify the qualities that make the highest-quality managers at Google Inc., and then to replicate those qualities across the entire company.

The end result: A simple, yet elegant, list of eight management practices that the best Google managers consistently do. Here's the list, in order of importance to Google:

1. Be a good coach. Provide specific, constructive feedback, balancing the negative and the positive. Have regular one-on-ones, presenting solutions to problems tailored to your employees' specific strengths.

2. Empower your team and don't micromanage. Balance giving freedom to your employees, while still being available for advice.

3. Express interest in team members' success and personal well-being. Get to know your employees as people, with lives outside of work. Make new members of your team feel welcome and help ease their transition.

4. Be productive and results oriented. Focus on what employees want the team to achieve and how they can help achieve it. Help the team prioritize work and use seniority to remove roadblocks.

5. Be a good communicator and listen to your team. Communication is two-way: You both listen and share information. Hold all-hands meetings and be straightforward about the messages and goals of the team.

6. Help your employees with career development.

7. Have a clear vision and strategy for the team. Even in the midst of turmoil, keep the team focused on goals and strategy. Involve the team in setting and evolving the team's vision and making progress toward it.

8. Have key technical skills so you can help advise the team. Roll up your sleeves and conduct work side-by-side with the team, when needed. Understand the specific challenges of the work.

Keep It Legal: The cost of an unwanted birthday party: \$450,000!

A legal drama began with the seemingly benign practice of recognizing each employee's birthday with a company-wide celebration.

Kevin worked for Gravity Diagnostics, a medical laboratory in Kentucky. Because of what he called an anxiety disorder, Kevin asked the office manager to not throw a party for him, afraid it might trigger a panic attack.

Somehow, the word did not get passed along. While the office manager was away, other employees planned a lunchtime birthday party for Kevin, complete with a banner and cake. Kevin heard what was about to happen and fled to his car during lunch.

The next day, two supervisors called Kevin into a meeting to scold him for his "somber

behavior.” Kevin promptly had a panic attack during which he put his hands up and hugged himself in an effort to calm down. The supervisors interpreted this as an aggressive gesture and fired Kevin.

He filed a lawsuit alleging intentional infliction of emotional distress and wrongful termination. After hearing two days of testimony, a jury concluded Kevin had been fired because of his disability. It awarded him \$150,000 in lost wages and \$300,000 for pain, suffering, embarrassment and loss of self-esteem. (*Berling v. Gravity Diagnostics*, Kenton (Ky.) Circuit Court, 2022)

Final note: Always ask first before scheduling birthday celebrations. In addition to workers who may have anxiety issues, some religions discourage celebrations of birthdays and other occasions. For example, Jehovah’s Witnesses do not celebrate birthdays or religious holidays.

Dog meets homework: How to interpret and deal with 6 classic employee excuses

While hopefully not as flimsy as the grade-school classic about canine intervention, adults offer a variety of excuses to get out of trouble at work. Some reasons employees provide will make a manager’s blood boil. Others, however, actually offer insight into workplace problems and merit further consideration. Here’s a look at six excuses modern managers often hear and actions that might eliminate them:

1. “I can’t come in because I’m sick (cough, cough).”

The perennial justification for staying home, workers know their managers will be even quicker to accept this absence reason nowadays because of the pandemic. Yet faking illness in 2022 may open up a can of worms. Many companies have measures in place requiring anything from quarantine to proof of a negative covid test to a doctor’s note before returning.

Instead of separating time off into sick days and vacation, consider lumping everything together as PTO. This cuts down on employees lying when they just want to take a mental health day or wait for the plumber.

2. “I’m not the only one around here guilty of this.”

Like a teenager trying to get parents off his back by noting everyone at the party was drinking, workers attempt to excuse bad behavior through strength in numbers. Like Mom and Dad, you probably find that line of reasoning unacceptable (and irritating). Remind the worker that the conversation at hand is about her behavior and personal responsibility for it. Point out relevant sections of the employee handbook being violated. Go over expectations for the future, including possible disciplinary procedures for failure to change.

On your own, take a hard look at whether the employee’s statement might contain some truth.

Few things get a worker's goat as much as unequal application of the rules. Team members will notice (and gossip about favoritism) when a manager reprimands one employee for tardiness but allows another to slip into his cubicle quietly.

3. "I didn't have the time."

Between labor shortages, safety protocols and changes to standard procedures, workers may be genuinely pressed to complete their to-do lists. Managers need to regularly examine what each person has on his plate and adjust accordingly. Resist the urge, however, to blindly buy the lack-of-time claim just because we're dealing with an unprecedented stretch of history. Did the person, perhaps, fail to complete the project because she procrastinated so much in the early stages that she could not catch up? Or does she spend so much time on less important tasks that she lets vital assignments fall through the cracks? Coaching on time management and prioritization may eliminate the not-enough-hours-in-the-day retort.

4. "No one ever told me how to do that."

The employee voicing this statement may be 100% correct. Especially in the current workplace climate, training isn't always as thorough as it should be. Or one supervisor erroneously thinks another leader assumed responsibility for instruction. Better communication among management and carefully structured onboarding of new hires reduces instances involving lack of knowledge. However, managers cannot let employees fall back on the "never taught" excuse. Rather, insist that workers adopt a proactive approach. They need to immediately speak up when assigned something they are not yet qualified to do. This heads-up allows time for training or for reassigning the task.

5. "That's not part of my job."

When creating a job description, employers typically include the phrase "other tasks as assigned" after listing common responsibilities. Bring that line to the disgruntled employee's attention. It also might prove a good time to emphasize that the organization prizes flexible, team-oriented employees willing to pitch in wherever needed.

A manager who keeps hearing this excuse too often, though, may want to better examine the situation. The utterer may have a point that her duties are swaying increasingly far from what she was hired to do. Or she might be frustrated and burned out from regularly being asked to take on more. Heartfelt recognition of efforts (and maybe even a raise) might be in order.

6. "I ran into a tech issue."

This excuse has "Zoomed" in popularity with expansion of remote work. Claims of a lost internet connection, inability to log in and even confusion on how to use video chat abound. As these problems actually happen, managers oftentimes need to give the benefit of the doubt. Upgrading equipment, providing stipends for higher internet speeds and offering step-by-step training can help. If tech issues still get blamed routinely for missed meetings or incomplete assignments, send over an IT staff member. The professional will either get to the root of the problem, or situations will suddenly clear up on their own!

4 mistakes let good people slip away

A full quarter of your highest-potential employees may plan to jump ship within a year. Some common mistakes to avoid putting it into their heads that there are greener pastures elsewhere:

Mistake 1: Assuming that high potential means highly engaged. Smart people need to know why they should stick around. Recognize them early, don't abandon them and let them help continually solve the company's biggest problems.

Mistake 2: Equating high performance with advancement potential. Yes, low performers don't usually have high advancement potential, but that's not to say that high performers always do. Look for ability, engagement and above all, aspiration. Ask: "What would entice you to take a job with another organization tomorrow?"

Mistake 3: Protecting them from blunders. Ah, the boomer leader as helicopter parent, always hovering and shielding junior from harm. Future leaders need to test their limits, and they may derail. In that derailment, they'll find wisdom.

Mistake 4: Forcing star employees to share the pain. Under normal circumstances, high potentials put in 20% more effort. Their workload may be even heavier because of downsizing, reduced hours or restructuring. Make sure you're distributing rewards according to employees' tangible contributions.

— Adapted from "[How to Keep Your Top Talent.](#)" Jean Martin and Conrad Schmidt, *Harvard Business Review*

The Breakroom

A bad plan is better than none. As soon as any plan is made, those involved in making it begin to refine it. This means both that no plan is ever finished and that no plan, however faulty or incomplete, is useless. The least it will give you is a starting point and a sense of direction, and those are all anyone needs at the beginning of a project.

Apply the "10/10 rule" in meetings. Talk for no longer than 10 minutes. Then allot 10 minutes for the group to discuss issues it cares about. Whether the members expand on your comments or raise unrelated topics, give them time to share what's on their minds.