

Stop Waiting for People to Leave: Why Stay Interviews Are the Key to Retention and Growth



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If you're waiting for your people to walk out the door before you start asking meaningful questions about their experience at work, you're missing the point. When we wait until employees have decided to leave to figure out what is going wrong, we are losing the opportunity to connect, to truly understand what matters to our employees, and to build the kind of environment that keeps them engaged and loyal long so that they don't start looking for the exit.

What would happen to retention in your organization if, instead of learning about and addressing issues when people are walking out the door, you proactively created the space for honest conversations *before* the resignation letter is even a thought?

That's where stay interviews come in. And as we see it, stay interviews are more than just a "check-the-box" exercise. They're an opportunity to shift how we view and relate to those who work with us. They're a chance to ask the essential questions, like:

What's going well for you here?

What could be better?

Do you feel heard?

But here's the thing: the questions themselves are secondary to the *mindset* behind them. When we genuinely want to understand someone's experience, we need to see *them*. Not just as employees who do the work, but as people—whole, complex, and valuable individuals who contribute much more than just a paycheck. If we see them as people, wouldn't we be curious about what their experience is like *right now*, regardless of whether they've shown signs of wanting to leave? How else will they know that we want their unvarnished feedback regarding what it's really like for them to work at our organization, if we don't ask?

See people

The simple truth is that people don't leave organizations; they leave an experience that is no longer satisfying at best and unbearable at worst. People leave because they don't feel valued. This is why actively creating a space where people feel seen—not just as workers, but as individuals with needs, concerns, and ideas that matter—is vital.

And, yes, this includes proactively asking tough questions. If we're going to ask employees to share their thoughts and concerns, we need to create a space that allows for honest, unfiltered feedback and then follows with collaborative effort make changes *together*.

Create the safety to share

The greatest hurdle with stay interviews is often the reluctance some employees may feel to share openly. What if they don't feel safe enough to tell the truth? What if they fear retribution or that their honesty will be used against them? If we don't create an environment where employees feel safe sharing their true feelings, all we're doing is checking a box. And that's not the point.

To get to the heart of the matter and *really* make progress, we have to go beyond just asking questions. We need to proactively share first—we need to meet to give. When we step into the conversation and model vulnerability by owning our own shortcomings as leaders, we show employees that it's safe to be open, to share their thoughts without fear, and to be a part of the solution. In practice, this looks like leaders being the first to acknowledge areas where they could improve. It means saying things like:

"We've noticed that communication in our team could be better."

"We see that work-life balance could be a challenge for some of you right now."

"We know we have room to grow in terms of how we recognize your hard work."

By leading with this level of honesty, we not only acknowledge areas where we have room to improve, but we also open up the space for employees to feel safe enough to share their own experiences. We are saying, "We get it. We're here to improve. We see some areas where we need to change, but we have a lot of blind spots and we really want to know what your experience has been."

This approach breaks down the barriers that prevent honest

conversations. When employees see that leadership is willing to be vulnerable and to acknowledge their own imperfections, it makes it easier for them to reciprocate. They know they're not being judged, they're being heard.

Why stay interviews matter more than ever

Retention has always been a challenge for organizations, but right now, in a world that's more dynamic and fluid than ever, the stakes are even higher. Gallup's research consistently shows that organizations with higher employee engagement experience higher productivity, better retention, and greater profitability. And what drives engagement? Feeling seen, heard, and understood by the organization you work for.

If we don't regularly check in with employees, if we don't create the space for those critical conversations, we're setting ourselves up for avoidable turnover. The cost of losing an employee goes far beyond the financial hit of hiring and training a new one. It's the loss of valuable institutional knowledge, the loss of relationships, and the decline in team morale that comes with it.

Stay interviews help prevent this by fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Instead of waiting until someone is about to leave, they proactively address the issues that matter most to employees. They're a tool that allows organizations to create a work environment where people not only want to stay but *choose to stay*.

Implementing stay interviews: practical steps for success

We can't just talk the talk—we have to walk the walk. If stay interviews are going to make a real impact, they need to be

more than a one-time check-in. Here's how to make them work:

4. Make It Ongoing. Stay interviews shouldn't be a one-off exercise. Embed them into your regular rhythm of engagement. Use them as a tool for ongoing dialogue, not just a crisis-response mechanism. Make them a part of your leadership philosophy, and they'll become a powerful way to build connection, trust, and loyalty within your team.

The bottom line: stay interviews are about more than just retention Stay interviews aren't just about *keeping people around*; they're about building a culture where people feel connected, heard, and empowered. They're about creating a work environment where employees feel seen—not just as resources, but as full human beings with unique experiences and perspectives. When we operate from that mindset, retention becomes a natural byproduct.

1. See People. Start by seeing the person, not the role they're filling. Approach the interview from the perspective of genuine curiosity about *their experience*. It's not about the company's agenda—it's about them. Ask questions that invite honest feedback, like, "What's one thing that would make you feel more engaged here?" or, "If you could change anything, what would it be?"

2. Create Psychological Safety. Be willing to lead with vulnerability. Share where you see room for growth in your leadership or where the organization can improve. This establishes an open, non-judgmental space for honest conversation.

3. Follow Through—No Excuses. Employees need to feel that their feedback won't just disappear into the ether. To create this trust, you have to act. The worst thing you can do is ask for feedback and then *do nothing* with it. Act on the insights you gain from stay interviews. Employees will only trust you if they see changes happening based on their input. Make sure to communicate any actions you're taking as a result of their

feedback. This builds trust and shows that their voices matter.

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