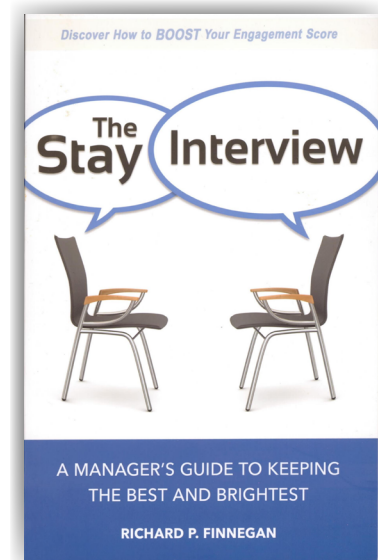


The Stay Interview

A Manager's Guide to Keeping the Best and Brightest

Richard P. Finnegan

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KEY CONCEPTS

- Stay interviews are meant to provide a safe and effective method of feedback for employees to express their thoughts and needs. They can be effective tools for engaging and retaining employees.
- Premeeting steps to effective stay interviews include planning, listing questions, slate cleaning, gathering resources, moving past fear, invitations and scheduling, choosing the setting, gathering equipment, and envisioning success.
- Actions during a stay interview consists of listening, taking notes, probing with questions, and owning up to corporate responsibility. It is important for managers to repeat key points that are made by employees back to them to demonstrate that their concerns and insights have been heard.
- Stay plans must be unique for each employee. A good stay plan reflects the strengths and weaknesses of each individual worker. It is usually necessary to conduct two or three follow-up meetings to finalize a stay plan.
- Fulfillment is as important as the stay plan itself. Management must strive to honor all commitments and pledges that are agreed to. Forecasting is done in tandem with fulfillment and is based on monthly or yearly increments.
- Stay interviews are most effective when management avoids the “Thirteen Traps,” which include bringing up performance evaluation content, being sketchy regarding company resources, losing focus, becoming defensive, attempting quick solves, and breaking trust.
- While every stay interview is different, two trends are present in most interviews: (1) Culturally specific and industry specific details play no role in the effectiveness of stay interviews in raising employee retention rates, and (2) most employees favor talking about what drives and motivates them at their jobs.

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Engagement levels among U.S. employees present an area of critical concern for employers. Each year an increasing number of workers voluntarily quit their jobs. The loss of a key employee can throw a wrench into even the most profitable company or organization. In **The Stay Interview**, Richard P. Finnegan emphasizes that learning to understand employee needs and motivations is the best way to increase retention rates. Stay interviews provide a direct and highly efficient means to engage employees at a level of intimate honesty that promotes worker retention. By using probes and effective listening, managers extend their own level of competency by ensuring that departments remain staffed by the best available workers.

THE STAY INTERVIEW

The best way to define a *stay interview* is to list what it is *not*. A stay interview is not a team meeting, an interview conducted by human resources (HR), a method for developing plans, an evaluation of job performance, or a trendy, one-time diversion that fails to include follow-ups. Essentially, a stay interview allows an employee a direct method of communicating his or her desires and level of satisfaction—with both the job and the company.

To conduct an effective stay interview, a manager must place the employee's needs and point of view at the highest level of priority. The stay interview is a more effective way of overcoming productivity obstacles than traditional performance reviews, engagement surveys, exit surveys, training classes, and "rounding," which involves the use of chitchat between management and employees. These techniques, unlike the stay interview, are not designed to identify and prevent potential employee departures.

Although stay interviews will strengthen any company or organization, one of the main benefits is the increased happiness and satisfaction that managers experience. Retaining top employees improves productivity, allowing management to meet required numbers and leading to managerial success. In turn, the manager—the person conducting the stay interview—must have his or her employees' trust. The interview itself can serve as a trust builder, as the interviewer's job is to fully listen and carefully consider everything the employee says.

The biggest objection to the use of stay interviews is time. Most managers assume that HR should be responsible for employee retention, and that employee morale is best left to the employees themselves. In reality, management is the key factor in ensuring that the best people are in the most important positions and that employee performances remain at top levels. Stay interviews accomplish this; they provide a tool for increased personal happiness and corporate profit.

Stay interviews provide the insight to know rather than have to assume if each employee fits correctly, is motivated to give 100 percent, and has intentions to stick around.

PREPARING TO CONDUCT STAY INTERVIEWS

Before conducting a stay interview, it is essential for a manager to follow a nine-step preparation plan. Each premeeting step is designed to increase the manager's understanding of employee needs while strengthening employee commitment.

1. *Plan.* When first preparing for the stay interview, a manager should make a list with two columns: one for what is important for the employee, and one for what the manager believes. The latter column is simply for topics the manager might like to introduce if the employee does not. The contents of the two columns should be kept separate; what is important to employees is what should be stressed. Two potential detours

exist at this stage: The employee will introduce unforeseen topics during interview, or the stay interview will somehow devolve into a routine performance review.

2. *Have a clean slate.* The employee sets the agenda for a stay interview. This means that management must refrain from directing the topic of conversation. An interviewer should not project his or her personal ideas onto the meeting's agenda.
3. *Devise questions.* Stay interview questions should be open-ended so that employees feel free to expound on their feelings and opinions. A question is different from a *probe*, which should be used to gain information from the employee regarding potential solutions to problems. Five specific questions function as ideal probes during a stay interview: (1) What do you look forward to? (2) What are you learning? (3) Why do you stay here? (4) When was the last time you thought about leaving? (5) What would make work better for you?

Client managers at my client companies conduct stay interviews at least once per year . . . They also conduct stay interviews two times with new hires within the "tipping point" period when new hires typically quit.

4. *Have resources close at hand.* Reference to existing programs that are designed to retain employees should be at the ready during a stay interview. A good manager can match a company program to an employee need during the interview.
5. *Move past fear.* A good rule of thumb to follow during a stay interview is to "probe deeply, solve completely." Understanding is the first priority for management; employee feedback should be met with openness and genuine concern.
6. *Invite and schedule.* The manager should let employees know that 30-minute interviews are to be conducted on an individual basis in the near future. The first should be scheduled with an employee who is more or less comfortable in his or her position and is compatible with management. The next interviews should be with the most valued employees; then with those who perform well but who may be considering leaving.
7. *Choose a setting.* When searching for new information from employees, it is crucial to select an environment where they feel comfortable and secure. Formality—or lack thereof—should be considered. It is generally a better idea to conduct a stay interview outside of the office in order to loosen the employee's sense of subordination.
8. *Gather equipment.* A stay interview requires either an electronic device or paper for keeping notes. During the meeting, the manager needs to make detailed notes regarding key conversation items to use for crafting a stay plan. Taking notes also clearly demonstrates the manager's attention and concern to the employee.
9. *Envision success.* The premeeting materials consist of a two-columned list, a clean slate, five researched questions, resources about employee programs, guidelines for moving past fear, and a detailed plan for invitations and schedules for targeted stay interviews with each employee.

FOUR ESSENTIAL SKILLS

Four core skills are needed to conduct an effective stay interview:

1. *Careful listening.* Effective listening involves more than a person's ears. Eye contact, body language, and verbal responses are crucial cues for demonstrating attention and authenticity. One tool is to strategically use the phrase: "Let me tell you what I heard you say to see if I got it right." Another key is to restate the employee's emotions in words that show comprehension and empathy.
2. *Taking notes.* Pen and paper are more useful for note taking than electronic devices. Notes allow management to capture all critical points for later reference. Taking notes also shows employees that their opinions are of genuine importance. It also aids in keeping similar employee comments separate and distinct.

3. *Probing.* Questions such as “Can you give me an example?” or “Can you tell me more about...?” are open-ended and allow employees the freedom to offer new and important information. Probing can discover the root of an employee’s urge to terminate his or her employment.
4. *Owning up to corporate decisions and corporate responsibilities.* Managers must demonstrate support for company policies while also maintaining trust with workers. Good managers must be able to state honestly that they support executive decisions and that they believe executives make decisions based on knowledge that is unavailable to management and employees.

MANAGING THE EXCHANGE

Opening remarks during the stay interview are focused on three objectives: informing the employee about the meeting’s purpose, narrowing the employee’s potential suggestions by limiting expectations, and ensuring that the employee understands that words spoken during the interview in no way constitute a legally binding contract.

Finnegan classifies employees into five types: satisfied, mystery, low performing, overly ambitious, and high performing. In each interview, the manager must be sure to probe deeply and solve completely. The following five scenarios illustrate how a stay interview can be used with nearly any type of employee:

1. *Satisfied.* Shelia is a competent employee who has never expressed dissatisfaction with her sales position. During her stay interview, Shelia says she gains energy from coming to her job each day and wants to remain in her current position. Management’s best move in this scenario is to repeat back Shelia’s key points to her and close the interview by encouraging her to come forward in the future if she should have any issues, ideas, or concerns.
2. *Mystery.* David was hired as a computer programmer after graduating from a top-tier university. Management believed he would be a hard worker and key hire. David’s stay interview reveals that he is uncomfortable with people but deeply motivated by programming and by gaining new knowledge. Management should provide David with new opportunities to expand his knowledge.
3. *Low performer.* Robert is a department head at an assisted-living center who is a plodder and whose job is hanging in the balance. Robert’s stay interview shows that he has lost faith in the company’s mission. Management must use this opportunity to encourage Robert, and remind him that other roles exist in the company for employees who remain focused and motivated.
4. *Ambitious.* Tyler was hired six months prior for a call center team. A medium performer, Tyler shows ambitions to move into management. Tyler’s stay interview shows that he is hungry to move up in the company but lukewarm on making improvements in his performance. Management should provide Tyler with company resources related to increasing leadership skills, while also reminding Tyler of his obligations to master his current assignments.
5. *High performer.* Tanya is a prize employee who works in quality control. After only two years at the plant, she has become the de facto leader in the plant manager’s absence. During her stay interview, Tanya refers to a set of notes and offers a range of beneficial ideas to improve plant efficiency. In this scenario, management must accept that Tanya may be a continually challenging employee, but one that is highly valuable for ensuring managerial success.

Some might wonder whether to conduct a stay interview with someone who’s on his way out the door. Sometimes low performers are just wrong hires and you need to let them go. But at least as often, their situation drags down their performance—from poor training, a bad job fit, or a jerk boss.

The important takeaways from these scenarios are that some employees are content with things as they are; some have more ambition than loyalty; a stay interview can push a mediocre employee to a productive one simply by demonstrating management's interest; some quiet employees have to be prodded for basic information; and high performers often have egos to match.

DEVELOPING STAY PLANS

After probing deeply to solve completely, the next step is for the manager to work together with the employee to develop a *stay plan*—the actions each must take following the stay interview. After reviewing an employee's interview remarks, a manager then presents his or her ideas for the employee's consideration and feedback. The following points are ground rules for generating effective stay plans:

- Stay plans should be customized for each employee.
- Each stay plan must reflect a particular employee's strengths and weaknesses and hone in on what conditions inspire top performance.
- Some employees do not require stay plans; they are content with their jobs.
- Second and third meetings are required for building a working stay plan.
- Managers must reserve the right to reject specific requests, such as pay raises, from employees.
- Some employees may simply never be committed to a given company.

Stay plans work best when built mutually by you and your employee... Your plan should include precise activities each of you will do and dates you will meet.

Change starts from the bottom up. There are three main methods for establishing an employee-driven plan of action that will result in a working stay plan. The first is to match up an obvious employee ambition with an opportunity that exists in the company or organization. The second is to deal with an employee request or concern that exceeds managerial authority by pledging it to the executive level. The third method is to challenge corporate policies. It is up to management to find a workable strategy to accommodate employee needs—making changes to corporate policies, when possible, to reflect a bottom-up prioritization.

A good stay plan has five components: objectives for each initiative, managerial actions, employee actions, dates for all actions and objectives, and written documents for each party. Plans should ideally include no more than three objectives, which should be tied directly to the feedback provided by individual employees.

CLOSING AND FORECASTING

A stay meeting presents an opportunity for increasing employee trust. Without trust, employees are unlikely to offer valuable responses; they are also unlikely to respond to verbal offers and commitments offered by management as incentives for retention. The close of a stay meeting is an especially crucial time, as this is when concrete objectives must be combined with actions, dates, and proposals for written documents.

Final words from management at a stay meeting must be in the form of a question, centered on follow-up processes, and involve eye contact. The final question posed by management is meant to leave the door open for future stay interview discussions. The parting words of a stay interview segue to the next stage of the process: the fulfillment of stay plan commitments. This fulfillment must be total and without qualification on management's behalf.

Fulfillment is accomplished at the same time as forecasting. Managers and executives should plot forecasts in three increments of time: 1 year or longer, 6–12 months, and 0–6 months. Special attention should be paid to the connection between each individual forecast and the corresponding employee performance review. Forecasting is a way to improve conditions for future stay interviews, as reflecting back on each employee's response will focus ideas and points for future probes.

Each type of employee, from satisfied to low performer, can be evaluated to gain a realistic assessment of their staying power. Knowing the individual forecast for each employee allows managers to focus on increasing the engagement level of each worker. The first task for any manager is to transform low-motivated workers into highly engaged workers.

Forecasting engagement levels is a difficult process, but one that is closely connected to the stay interview process of listening, probing, and planning. The need to know employee motivation levels will increase management's focus in communicating with workers. Surveys can be used in conjunction with predictions by management on an employee-by-employee basis to gauge management's level of commitment and perception.

Managers must learn the skill of "managing up" in order to highlight their personal contributions to productivity and employee retention through the use of stay interviews. A team leader should present information to a superior to indicate that data-driven efforts to increase employee retention have been initiated, and that emphasizes the actions being taken to increase employee loyalty and motivation.

AVOIDING THE 13 STAY INTERVIEW TRAPS

Stay interviews hold potential pitfalls. Most of these potential problems occur when interviews are conducted inefficiently. The following 13 traps should be avoided whenever possible:

1. *Fear of response.* Managers who are reluctant to use stay interviews often fear that the employee responses will present them with no-win situations based on specific areas of concern, such as pay or promotion. The proper approach toward this inappropriate fear is to rely on prepared probes, as well as solutions that are reliable responses to these specific employee concerns.
2. *Bringing up performance issues.* Unless an employee's responses indicate an ambition that goes beyond the scope of his or her performance, issues related to job performance should be avoided—particularly if they have not been discussed previously. If an employee uses the phrase "You never told me that," the stay interview is effectively concluded.
3. *Tipping the agenda.* Since managers will have an "Important to Them" list for reference, there may be a temptation for them to direct the conversation to items on the prepared list. The employee must be the driver of any good stay interview's content.
4. *Being sketchy about resources.* A manager must know the full details of the company's resources and be prepared to reference and offer them during stay interviews.
5. *Forcing meetings.* The initial drive toward conducting stay interviews should originate from team leaders, not from the top levels of management on down.
6. *Conquering silence.* A manager should leave ample space in the conversation for an employee to pause, reflect, and then continue speaking. A manager who speaks simply to relieve tension or break an awkward pause is redirecting the flow of the interview and discouraging the employee from opening up.

By far the easiest mistake to make is to fail to probe deeply enough to learn what employees really think. Our managers over time have learned from experience that deep probing requires the courage to ask tough questions and then wait through the silence to learn the most critical information.

7. *Losing focus.* Even if an employee's conversation is so dull that it is sleep inducing, a manager must remain on task. One helpful hint is to write the same phrase over and over on a notepad in order to remain alert.
8. *Becoming defensive.* Rather than responding to perceived criticisms, a manager must remain focused on probes, allowing the employee to control the flow of conversation. Listening, being respectful, and asking probing questions establishes employee trust by proving that the employee's concerns have been heard.
9. *Throwing the company under the bus.* Executives or other higher ups should never be blamed for conflicts, policies, or problems. The best response to criticism of the company or company executives is to state confidence in the knowledge and decision-making capacities of top officers.
10. *Solving quickly.* The objective of a stay interview is to probe deeply, solve completely. Quick solutions are seldom effective. Managers must ask and listen to gain valuable employee information.
11. *Building a poor stay plan.* It is vital for employees to be involved in follow-up actions and the development of stay plans.
12. *Dropping the ball.* Managers must honor all commitments made in stay plans, including deadlines.
13. *Breaking trust.* Any statement or action that fails to promote trust or offer a solution to trust-breaking issues is a detriment to a stay interview.

EXPERIENCED MANAGERS TELL THEIR TALES

While each stay interview varies depending on the individual, managers report that two common threads run through most stay interviews. The first is that stay interviews tend to raise retention rates and engagement levels regardless of the culture or industry. Second, employees across the board tend to talk about what they like and dislike at their jobs and what drives their daily routines. The executives and managers interviewed by Finnegan provided hard evidence for the impact of stay interviews. Most reported dramatic increases in retention rates and employee performance once the interviews were put into practice. Managers also learned the importance to employees of recognition, consistency, knowledge, appreciation, and the overall company culture.

FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Estimated Reading Time: 2–3 hours, 128 pages

The Stay Interview provides a step-by-step guide to utilizing interviews and strategies to engage and retain key employees. Richard P. Finnegan walks managers through the process, from the premeeting stage to the implementation of follow-up interviews and retention plans. Numerous first-hand accounts of the effectiveness of stay interviews are presented by managers from important and emerging companies.

The book is intended for managers who want to increase their employee retention rates, but is also an important resource for workers interested in gaining insight into the mechanics of stay interviews to increase their effectiveness. Chapters should be read consecutively, as each represents a necessary step in the interview process. A detailed index provides quick reference to key concepts.

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About the Author

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