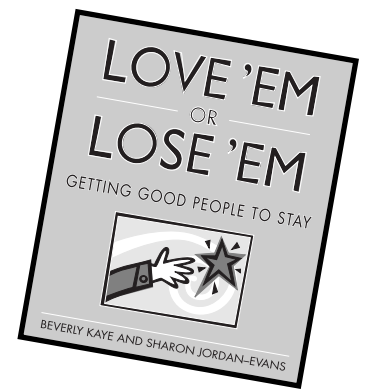


Ask, Stupid.

Why save the best questions for an exit interview?
Ask them now, and you'll really make a difference.

by Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans



What is the key to holding on to 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 there and what might lure them away.

Ask—So You Don't Have to Guess

When we suggest that managers ask their people why they stay or what would keep them, the reactions are often a mix: "You've got to be kidding." "Isn't that illegal?" "What if they give me an answer I don't want to hear?"

Some managers dance around the subject for fear of putting people on the spot or putting ideas into their head (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 battle for retention.

The How and the When

How can you increase the odds of getting honest input from your employees? 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 would make you want to stay here? What might lure you away?" Listen actively to the answer you receive. Is it a chance to learn and grow, a promotion and big title, or something else?

Beyond listening, you need to respond, and what you say is critical. Responses like "that's unrealistic" immediately halt the dialogue and cause employees not to open up again, and potentially 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.



Other Questions to Ask

- ★ *Do you feel recognized for your accomplishments?*
- ★ *Do I support you in matching your skills and interests to your career goals?*
- ★ *Are you challenged in your day-to-day work?*
- ★ *Is the training you want available to you?*
- ★ *Have I helped you to develop a career action plan?*
- ★ *Do I give you regular, candid feedback?*
- ★ *What are you struggling with?*
- ★ *What would make your work and life easier?*

Why They Stay

They come up again and again, throughout every industry and at every level. In order of popularity and frequency, we've listed below the most common reasons people stay at an organization. (Please note that 90 percent of respondents listed at least one of the first three items among the top three or four reasons they stay.)

1. Career growth, learning, and development
2. Exciting and challenging work
3. Meaningful work—making a difference and a contribution
4. Great people
5. Being part of a team
6. Good boss
7. Recognition for work well done
8. Fun on the job
9. Autonomy—sense of control over my work
10. Flexibility, including work hours and dress code
11. Fair pay and competitive benefits
12. Inspiring leadership

The Bottom Line

Stop guessing about what will keep your stars home and happy. If you need to, have someone else do the asking for you. It might be a human resources professional, an outside consultant, or a manager from another department or business unit. Or you might ask in written form, as in a quick survey, where answers can be written or e-mailed. Perhaps you can ask in an anonymous way by having a third party collect the answers and give them to you. Or take our favorite approach—ask the questions yourself, one-on-one, with your employees. This may be all you need to do.

