

Career Compass No. 80: To Retain Your Talent, Use Stay Interviews

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I am an administrative services director in a mid-sized urban county. We have already experienced a “retirement wave” and have been hiring a good number of younger, talented professionals. Generally, these employees are hungry to learn and grow, want to be challenged, and are eager to advance and make a bigger contribution.

The big problem is that we cannot keep the talented employees. If they don’t move up quickly enough, they get antsy and jump to another organization. There are only so many promotional opportunities in our organization, and we are constrained in offering more compensation.

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Your talent crisis is not unique. Local government is in a war for talent. . . and we’re losing the war. Talent is mobile and can move anywhere.

Gallup’s most recent *State of the Workforce* report found that 63% of American employees are confident that they can find a job as good as the one they currently have (up from 42% in 2010.) Moreover, 51% are actively looking for or are open to a new job. (Lisa Brown Alexander, “Help Desk: How Stay Interviews Can Help Retain Top Talent,” *Baltimore Business Journal*, Dec. 6, 2019.)

To exacerbate the challenge, local governments can no longer “poach” seasoned talent from other agencies. You must grow your own . . .and then keep them. Therefore, the challenge is how do you create organizational “stickiness.” (See Frank Benest, “[Growing](#)

[and Retaining Talent—Strategies to Create Organizational Stickiness,”](#) PM magazine, Oct 2008.)

As you suggest, you cannot retain talent based on compensation. First, some other public agency or private company will out-pay you. Second, a public agency’s ability to significantly increase compensation is constrained by taxpayer sentiment about significantly raising public employee salaries and benefits.

Most importantly, once an agency pays more or less competitively, *culture trumps compensation*. Workplace culture will help or hinder your efforts to retain talent.

How Do We Find Out What Employees Want?

When we are trying to encourage talent to join us, we typically lavish attention on them. We take them to lunch or dinner and talk about what a great organization we have and the opportunities that we offer. Once we actually hire them, we forget about them until they leave. We then do an “exit interview” and ask them why they are leaving. Of course, by then, it is too late and we have lost them.

To find out what employees value and want in terms of their work experience, we need to ask them.

What Is a “Stay Interview”?

Very few local governments consistently use a stay interview as a talent retention tool. These conversations are a powerful way to connect with employees and “re-recruit” talent.

A stay interview is a one-on-one interview between a manager and a valued employee. The purpose of the interview is to learn what will keep the employee working with you and elicit what would entice the employee to leave you. (See John Sullivan, [“The Many Benefits That Come From Using Stay Interviews,”](#) TLNT newsletter, Dec 3, 2013.)

What Are Some Stay Interview Questions?

Here are some typical stay interview questions that elicit key information from the employee:

- What do you like most about your work?
- In your work here, where do you find meaning and purpose?
- What keeps you here?
- What would entice you away?
- What do you want to learn this year?
- What makes for a great day at work?
- What do you wish you had more time to do?
- What brings you down on the job?
- Is there anything you'd like to change about your job to make it more meaningful or rewarding?
- Do you feel recognized for your accomplishments?

- What strengths or talents do you have that aren't being used?
- What is your greatest challenge or roadblock?
- What part of working here strikes you as ridiculous?
- How can I or the organization help you reach your career goals?
- What support do you need to be more effective?
- What are things you are doing that you would like to stop doing or delegate to others?
- If you could wave a magic wand, what changes would you make in the work environment?
- What threatens your peace of mind, your health, or personal fulfillment?
- What can we do to ensure we keep you with us?

(Marnie Green, *Painless Performance Conversations: A Practical Approach to Critical Day-to-Day Workplace Discussions*, 2013. Also Susan Scott, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life One Conversation at a Time*, 2004.)

How Often Should You Interview an Employee?

You should conduct a stay interview conversation at least once a year, if not twice a year.

What Are Some Benefits of Stay Interviews?

There are a number of benefits for you as a manager, the employee, and the organization.

First and foremost, you generate information on how to better engage the employee. Each employee is different, so the information can help you make adjustments that would further energize the employee. Given the interests of the employee, it could be a stretch assignment in a particular area of interest or meaning for the employee, or a team leadership opportunity, or some flexibility in scheduling to get a certification, or the opportunity to use a talent or skill (social media or training skills).

Second, the conversation will generate information on what may entice an employee to leave. For instance, the employee may feel the need to leave in order to supervise other staff, lead a team, or learn new technologies.

Third, you can generate some key intelligence about the organization and its culture and some indication about how to enhance the workplace.

Finally, the interview demonstrates that the employee is valued and you care about the person. According to Gallup, "someone at work cares about me" is one of the most powerful factors in engaging and thus retaining talent.

What Do You Do With the Information?

You must act upon the information!

Stay interviews are powerful because they provide *actionable* feedback on how to enhance the employee's workplace experience. As opposed to employee surveys, you get information that is directly tied to the needs and wants of the valued employee. Just conducting the interview is entirely insufficient. You must demonstrate that you heard what the employee had to say and that you are willing to modify a few things as part of your commitment to the employee. Often enhancements (such as social events to connect employees, some telework or more appreciation events) also enrich the organizational culture.

For instance, as a result of the conversation, you may give the person a working title that better reflects the employee's actual duties and will support her efforts to advance. Or, you may provide a flex schedule so the employee can take some classes for their certification or attend his daughter's soccer games.

In making modifications, you want your direct reports at a minimum to love more than 20% of their total work load activities and hate less than 20% of their work activities.

By taking action in those areas where you have latitude, you demonstrate that

- The organization values the employee.
- You are committed to the employee.
- You care about the person.

What If an Employee Wants Something You Can't Provide?

There are obviously some limits to what a manager can do in terms of compensation, benefits, perhaps even assignments and scheduling. Most employees recognize these limits or constraints. In fact, most people are rather timid in asking for new stretch assignments or new learning or leadership opportunities.

In reality, most enhancements are small actions that are within the control of the manager. For example, a manager typically can clarify expectations, recognize someone's achievements, provide some flexibility in scheduling, engage the person in a new team project, or offer a learning opportunity. For the employee, these relatively small actions within the control of the manager have a big impact.

You might not be able to make all the changes desired by the staff person. What you can do is listen, validate what the person is feeling, express your support for the employee, and assure the person that you will explore options in those areas where there may be flexibility. As stated by Marnie Green, "focus on what you can do." (*Painless Performance Conversations: A Practical Approach to Critical Day-to-Day Workplace Discussions*, 2013).

What Are Tips for Conducting Powerful Stay Interviews?

1. State your intent

Let all your staff know that you will conduct stay interviews on an annual or biannual basis in order to enhance the employee experience, generate information on how to

improve the organization, and of course retain talent. By publicly stating your intent, you create a state of readiness so employees feel more comfortable in responding to you.

2. Schedule the time

I have a colleague who schedules on her calendar at the beginning of the year all her stay interviews with employees on their anniversary dates with the agency. And she refuses to let other obligations interfere with the annual schedule of interviews.

3. Start by sharing your appreciation

You certainly want to recognize the good work of the staff person. (According to Gallup, “I have received recognition in the last seven days” is another key factor fostering employee engagement.)

In addition to recognition for the work of the person, show appreciation for the person (i.e., express gratitude for their humor, optimism, persistence, team spirit). We value the person, not just their work. (Mike Robbins, “Why Employees Need Both Recognition and Appreciation,” *hbr.org*, Nov 12, 2019.)

4. Get away from the office

You want to get away from the formality of your office. If you do conduct the interview in your office, certainly don’t have a desk separating both of you. Better yet, I suggest that you have the conversation at a cafe or take a walk with the person.

5. Make it an informal conversation

While you have a list of interview questions, you want to make the interview an informal conversation.

6. Be curious

Approach the conversation with a curious mind. For example, when the employee shares that she’d like a new title, say: “Tell me more. What benefit would a new title provide you and the organization?”

7. Focus on new learning and challenge for the employee

Learning is the new “social glue.” As long as employees are learning, growing, and being challenged, they tend to stay with an organization. Therefore, spend some time in asking the person about what he or she wants to learn.

8. Summarize what you heard

At the end of the conversation, summarize some key information about what would keep the employee with you, what would entice the person away, what talents are going unused, and/or what they want to learn.

9. Follow up with employee

Based on the conversation, you might not be able to do everything desired by the employee, but you can do something. Let the employee know how you can respond and make the person's experience at work even better. Schedule a time with the employee for a follow-up conversation.

What Does the Research Say About a Winning Culture?

According to the research, workplace culture is in fact key to talent retention.

Talented employees want to

- Find meaning and purpose in the work.
- Learn and grow.
- Use their strengths and talents.
- Feel that they are valued by the organization.
- Have their opinions count.
- Experience a sense of belonging and community at work.

Local government officials used to believe that talent development and retention were nice discretionary activities. Talent development is now a key business imperative.

If you conduct stay interviews and act upon the information, you can enhance your culture and most importantly retain your talent.

(For more information and resources on winning the war for talent, see the Cal-ICMA Talent Initiative "[Talent 2.0](#)" report.)



Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *Career Compass* is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com. Read past columns at icma.org/careercompass.