RESETTING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

with the Power of Stay Interviews

How a new city manager and his management group worked hard and changed everything

BY DR. PETER PIRNEJAD AND DR. FRANK BENEST, ICMA-CM (RETIRED)

In October 2021, the town of Los Altos Hills, California, USA, welcomed a new city manager, Peter Pirnejad. Immediately, Peter realized that he and his small management group were facing a variety of workforce realities exacerbated by the pandemic:

- A number of staff vacancies due to the Great Resignation and the Silver Tsunami of retiring Baby Boomers and older Gen-Xers.
- The remaining staff feeling overworked, stressed out, and unappreciated.
- Employees were prioritizing life over work.
- A desire from the existing workforce to embrace remote/hybrid work and other flexible work options.
- An ambitious list of priorities from councilmembers, city commissioners, committee members, and a very active community of 8,000 residents. Sound familiar?

Resetting Culture Post-Pandemic

It quickly became apparent to the city manager that low compensation was an issue in attracting and retaining staff. Consequently, he secured council approval to conduct a total compensation study, which ultimately helped the council raise salaries and benefits to align with the mid-market of comparable cities.

Recognizing that competitive compensation was necessary but there was more to be done, the city manager then convened the small management group of department directors and mid-managers for a series of discussions about organizational culture. With the assistance of a consultant, the management group focused on three areas to improve culture or "the way we do things around here."

1. Create an array of more flexible and hybrid work schedules.
2. Work with the city council, commissions, and committees to set reasonable workload expectations.
3. Conduct "stay interviews" with all 26 employees.

Small work groups were designated to take action in these three focus areas.

To create more scheduling flexibility, the management group conducted a series of conversations with employees and then agreed to offer several work schedule options: a traditional Monday through

Friday 8/5 schedule (eight-hour work days/five days a week), , a 9/80 schedule (nine-hour work days for a total of 80 hours in two weeks, allowing for a day off), and a 4/10 schedule (four 10-hour days per week), as well as hybrid and remote options. The group also agreed that employees would discuss with their supervisor what schedule would work best for them and for the team.

To set more reasonable workload expectations, the management group developed a doable two-year work plan, including margins of uncommitted capacity to allow for new city council requests during the year. The city manager then worked with the council to hold an annual workshop and a mid-year check-in meeting on priorities and key projects.

Given the staff's current workload, the council also adopted a two-step protocol for any councilmember, commission, or committee to request new projects for staff and secure council approval. The process would first include agendizing a discussion on the merits of any new priority, and if warranted by the majority of the council, then direction to staff to come back with a plan that includes resources, timeline, and reprioritization of the approved work plan.

Stay interviews are powerful because they provide actionable feedback on how to enhance the employee's workplace experience.

The Power of Stay Interviews

In resetting culture, the stay interviews proved to be the most impactful effort. As opposed to exit interviews conducted after the employee has already decided to leave, 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 the organization and elicit what would entice the employee to leave the agency. Stay interviews are powerful because they provide *actionable* feedback on how to enhance the employee's workplace experience. The goals of the stay interviews were to:

- Retain talent.
- Demonstrate that the employee is valued and that the organization cares about the employee.
- Identify areas to enrich the organizational culture and enhance job satisfaction.
- Help create an organization that would attract new talent.

The group selected the stay interview questions (see

Figure 1

Stay Interview Questions

- What do you like most about your work?
- What do you find meaningful about the work you do?
- What keeps you here?
- What do you want to learn this year?
- What makes for a great day at work?
- Do you have some flexibility and autonomy in how you get the job done?
- Is there something you'd like to change about your job?
- Do you feel appreciated or recognized for your contributions and achievements?
- What strengths or talents do you have that aren't being used?
- What is your greatest roadblock or challenge?
- What would make your work more meaningful or satisfying?
- How can I or the organization help you reach your career goals? What can you do?
- Do you have one or several workmates with whom you socialize on or off the job?
- Do you feel that your opinion counts at work?
- If you could wave a magic wand, what is one positive change that you would make in the work environment?
- What can we do to ensure we keep you with us?

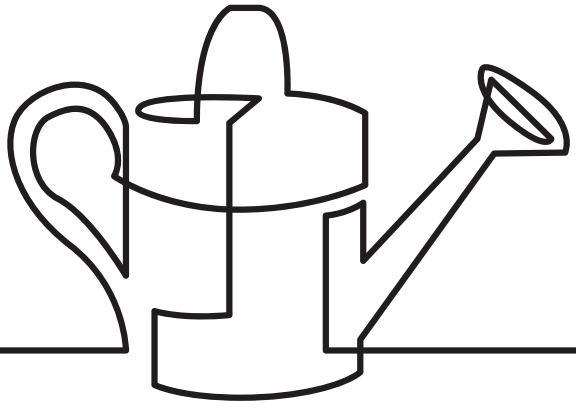


Figure 1) and approved a form to help the manager capture the information elicited by the individual conversations. All the managers then conducted the interviews with direct reports in May 2023. Subsequent to the interviews, the consultant created a summary of the themes that emerged from the discussions with employees, which was then submitted to the management group and city council for action.

Stay Interview Themes

Several themes from the stay interviews were evident, which led to an action plan aimed at enhancing the culture. Three areas were key:

1. **Learning and Career Development.** Employees recognized that management supported learning and growth, but they wanted additional development opportunities.

Actions taken: The management group has completed the following:

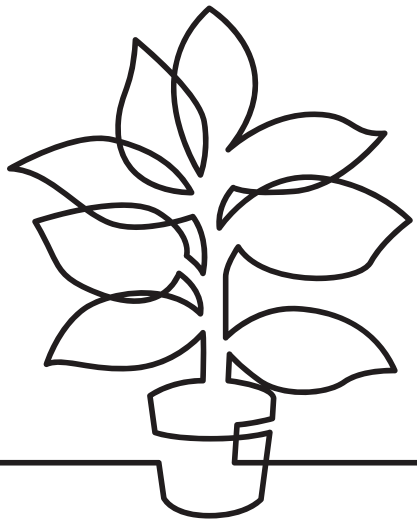
- Trained all managers on how to conduct "development conversations" with their direct reports. A development conversation is an informal discussion conducted by a manager/coach with an employee that allows the manager to help the employee explore their career aspirations, provide feedback, identify opportunities to learn and grow, and offer support and resources.
- Ensured that development conversations were conducted with 100% of employees.
- Offered all employees a "lunch and learn" training opportunity to create an individual career development plan.
- Provided a menu of development opportunities. For a sample menu format, go to calicma.org/talent-initiative.
- Continued full funding for training, certification, and professional involvements by staff.

2. **Reasonable Workload Expectations.** A top concern and theme from the stay interviews was heavy workloads.

Action taken: In addition to the city council's two-year work plan with a margin of unfilled capacity, the management group did the following:

- Secured funding for interns, part-time extra help, and a Management Fellow.
- Identified a few targeted areas where part-time employees, interns, or contract help could handle lower-level tasks, thus freeing up staff to do higher-level work. The group also hired a full-time Management Fellow who was a recent graduate.

3. **Culture of Appreciation.** The management group committed to a number of efforts to promote a sense of employee appreciation.



Only an enriched culture could create the organizational "stickiness" necessary for employees to stay.

Action taken: Continued practice of recognizing employees at every quarterly all-hands meeting; continued funding to conduct annual employee recognition event; recommended that the city council award service pins to longer-tenured employees at council meetings.

Based on the results of the stay interviews, the management group committed to conduct another round of stay interviews by the end of the fourth quarter in 2024.

Winning the War for Talent

The management group of Los Altos Hills recognized that it was in a war for talent with other agencies. While competitive compensation was necessary, it was insufficient to attract and retain talent. Only an enriched culture could attract talented employees and create organizational "stickiness" so they would stay. PM

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