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The value of an exit interview

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The exit interview upon termination of an employee's contract, may be a stressful and embarrassing ordeal for both the manager and the interviewee - or it may be a valuable feedback tool that brings out previously unsaid comments that can prove very useful to the employer.

The value of the feedback can be especially high, as this is a moment when the employee's mind is sharply concentrated on the relevant issues. When taken over a large sample, the findings could have major implications for corporate or departmental policy.

Exit interviews are not strictly mandatory (you can't order someone to confide their feelings), but they are a well-established routine for signing-off what may have been a significant phase of an individual's career. They can influence his/her retrospective view of the organisation, although there is a consensus that they should not be conducted by an immediate supervisor. The interviewer should be someone not involved in either the politics or the personal relationships that have governed the daily work of the person concerned.

The obvious choice would be an HR manager, whose training will hopefully have included exit interview techniques.

The exit interview is for encouraging a mainly one-way dialogue, including confidential input, whether it's the office rebel wanting an excuse to 'off-load' in the face of authority, or the shy young person communicating her private reservations for the first time. It carries its own set of questions, intended to stimulate usable answers, and even its own vocabulary. ("What could the department have done better?" means something quite different from "What should the department be doing better?")

Exit interviews can also be outsourced to an HR specialist in this field, and in my experience, those who opt for this route seldom find it a wasted investment.

One client of mine, Gregory, who ran the HR department of a large paint manufacturer in England, discovered he had a special talent for exit interviews. He became fascinated by what he called 'diagnosing a grievance', that is, identifying the real dissatisfaction that is often hidden behind apparent complaints about salary. In this way, Gregory was able to build up the most detailed picture of the organisation, as it was perceived by its employees, and this led to many useful reforms.

He became a consultant in due course, and his diagnostic skills were put to a serious test. The client was a top ballet-school, run by one of the world's most popular ballerinas. It looked like the ideal workplace, situated in a mansion among forests and water meadows. But the HR manager was reporting a growing list of resignations.

Gregory believed in listening to his intuition. He detected that something was being held back at the interviews. When the assistant bursar suddenly collapsed in tears, Gregory realised he would have to break a rule and promise anonymity if she would confide her problem -which would turn into a problem for him if there was any crime involved. Then the incredible truth came out. This top ballet-star was a kleptomaniac who had started defrauding the very school that carried her name.

Recognising a crisis, he obtained permission to interview the rest of the staff, and eventually two managers agreed to repeat the allegations to the police. Exit interviews may not always resolve emergencies in such a dramatic way. But those specialist skills often have a central role to play in the conduct of daily business.