Exit Interviews

Rationale – Why do Exit Interviews?

Exit interviews are conducted with departing employees, usually just before they leave. In some cases it can be done post-departure but the likelihood of commitment to this diminishes with each passing day once an employee leaves. From the church’s perspective, the primary aim of the exit interview is to learn reasons for a staff member’s departure, on the basis that critical reflection is a helpful driver for organizational improvement. Depending on the context surrounding the departure, exit interviews can also be done weeks or months prior to an employee’s departure, enabling a smooth transfer of knowledge and experience from the departing employee to a successor or replacement, or even to brief a team on current projects, issues and contacts.

Many churches ignore the opportunity that exit interviews offer, chiefly because exit interviews have not been practiced in the past, and starting them is a difficult initiative to undertake, given the potentially subjective and ‘fuzzy’ nature of the results, the time involved and the unspoken corporate urge to avoid exposure to criticism. Corporate insecurity & defensiveness is an obstacle to successful implementation of an exit interview strategy. Exit interviews are nevertheless a unique chance to survey and analyze the opinions of departing employees, who generally are more forthcoming, constructive and objective than staff still in their jobs.

From the departing employee’s perspective, an exit interview is a chance to give constructive feedback and to leave on a positive note with good relations and mutual respect.

Aims & Outcomes of Exit Interviews

- They provide an opportunity to 'make peace' with disgruntled employees, who might otherwise leave embittered.
- Exit interviews are seen by existing employees as a sign of positive, open church culture. They are regarded as caring and compassionate - a sign that the organization is a learning one; big enough to expose itself to criticism.
- Exit interviews accelerate leaderships’ understanding and experience of managing people and organizations. Hearing and handling feedback is a powerful development process for both the employee and the organization.
- Exit interviews provide valuable information as to how to improve recruitment and integration of new employees.
- Exit interviews provide direct indications as to how to improve staff retention.
- Sometimes an exit interview provides the chance to retain a valuable employee who would otherwise have left (churches often accept resignations far too readily without discussion or testing the firmness of feeling - the exit interview provides a final safety net).
- A significant proportion of employees who leave will be people that the church is actually very sorry to see leave. The exit interview therefore provides an excellent source of comment and opportunity relating to succession planning. Good people leave often because they are denied opportunity to grow and advance. Wherever this is happening churches need to know about it and respond accordingly.

- Exit interviews and a properly organized, positive exit process also greatly improve the chances of successfully obtaining and transferring useful knowledge, contacts, insights, tips and experience, from the departing employee to all those needing to know it, especially successors and replacements. Most are happy to help if you have the courage and decency to ask and provide a suitable method for the knowledge transfer, be it a briefing meeting, a one-to-one meeting between the replacement and the departing employee, or during the exit interview itself.

**Managing the interview**

1. Exit interviews are best conducted face to face because it provides for clearer communication and interpretation. A form could be provided and sent out but in reality there is no excuse for not sitting down with an employee for 30-60 minutes.

2. In managing the interview, listen rather than talk. This is about you (the church) learning about how you can improve and it is NOT about correcting the employee or defending yourself. The interviewee therefore needs time and space to respond.

   During the interview:
   a. Interpret and reflect for understanding
   b. Ask open what/how/why questions
   c. Avoid placing blame or creating a ‘witch-hunt’ atmosphere.
   d. Prepare a list of interview questions & topics beforehand (samples below)
   e. Take notes
   f. The style of interview will vary depending on the circumstances under which the employee left. However everyone should be given the opportunity for an exit interview.
   g. When the interview is complete say thanks, encourage them and commit to any follow up required
   h. Post-interview look at the responses as objectively as possible and summarize the learning’s
   i. Take action as necessary. This falls into 2 categories:
      - Remedial and preventative
      - Strategic improvement

3. No employee should be compelled to participate in an exit interview. Offer a questionnaire form as an alternative. Especially shy employees may give their best responses this way.