How to Handle an Exit Interview

When an employee joins a company, s/he is highly motivated and full of energy especially when they spend an estimated 75% of every waking hour in work-related activity. It’s not hard to see that ending the relationship between employer and employee is a big step in moving on from the company and how an employer handles the exit interview can have a lasting impact on the employee’s perceptions of the company. A sensitively-managed exit can ensure that their alumni become brand ambassadors who will speak highly of their former employer. Such a situation, if not arrested by timely and pro-active action, the demotivated employee tends to leave for better and greener pastures.

Like an induction programme, which introduces the new employee to the intricacies of the organization to help him/her settle down fast, the exit interview can also be an effective HR tool to reach the bottom of the employee’s grievances which ultimately leads to his/her exit, if not redressed. The exit interview concept has been in existence since 1920 and is one of the most effective mechanisms to get a feel on the health of the company culture and its shortcomings, provided the exit interview is conducted by persons with deep insight into human psychology and who are aware of human dynamics and organizational politics. An Action Plan drawn up based on factual and unbiased findings will help the company to prevent exit of highfliers.

An attempt has been made to highlight the critical importance of an Exit Interview based on my 35 years of corporate experience both in public and private sector companies. An effective interview system gives due importance to the following factors:

- Interviewers have to be well-trained and experienced.
- Action on the findings have to be mandatory.
- Complete confidentiality and anonymity guaranteed
- Conduct of interviews in accordance with company core values and beliefs

It is a fact that a wide range of organizational, interpersonal and personal factors do play a decisive role which leads to an employee’s decision to quit. Exit is a natural phenomenon. However, exit of good employees anytime due to the causes attributable to organizational indifference to their just aspirations can cause major problems, especially in the context of critical role of people power for enterprise excellence. All possible efforts have to therefore be made to prevent talent migration.

How to Go About an Exit Interview

Normally, exit interviews are conducted after the acceptance of the resignation letter of the employee pending release formalities. The exiting employee as a matter of precaution and fear of burning the bridges and reprisal from the current employer restrains himself from expressing his/her frank views. The reason being that the reference checking which is a vital aspect of recruitment process globally and any adverse comments on reference will ruin his/her career prospects in the future. To overcome this major hurdle, my recommendations are as under which I have experienced and found to be very effective:

a) On receipt of the resignation letter and before its acceptance, the department manager and HR must have a one-to-one interview with the employee to ascertain the factual reasons for his/her decision to quit. Based on the findings, if the grievances could be redressed as per the existing policy without upsetting the balance and harmony within the company, s/he should be asked to withdraw his/her resignation letter. The redressal measure should be acted upon within the stipulated time frame as per the commitment made to the employee.
However, if the employee is determined to leave, then his/her request to leave must be accepted with grace. However, s/he has to be informed that there would be a formal exit interview which will be conducted by the company authorized consultants and the views and suggestions shall be treated strictly confidential and complete anonymity shall be guaranteed.

b) To get to the bottom of the real reasons of quitting, a formal structured interview by the company authorized consultants as per the company guidelines and treating interview findings as strictly confidential and anonymous must be arranged. The findings received must cover detailed analytical report minus the name of the interviewee since thrust of the interview is to know the factors responsible for the exit of the employee. The focus has to be on what is wrong and not who is wrong. The reason may be either company HR policy or supervisory / team members treatment.

c) The advantages of such procedures are:

I) To get actual feedback from the departing employee without fear of reprisal
II) Confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed
III) The inputs received will be of immense value for corrective actions

**Guidelines for Interviewers**

- Never lose sight of company’s core values and beliefs
- Allow 80% talking time to the interviewee to tell his story and 20% to interviewers, they should do more probing than imposing.
- Interview ambience has to be relaxed, friendly and enabling.
- Confidentiality and anonymity fully guaranteed
- Unless sacked for misconduct or poor performance, send them off with a feeling that they are always welcome back.

**What to Ask**

As emphasized, the exit interviews have to be conducted by experienced persons either from the company or by outside experts covering aspects such as - reasons for leaving, job satisfaction, treatment of supervisors / team members and general issues as listed below:

1) Reasons for Leaving
   - Why did you decide to leave?
   - What were the provocations for you to quit?
   - Was there a single or multiple reasons which forced you to leave?
   - Whom did you speak to before taking final decision to quit?
   - Did you face any discriminatory treatment or experienced inhospitable working conditions?
   - When did you realize it’s time to say good-bye?

2) Job Satisfaction
   - Most and least satisfying aspects of your job?
   - Best and Worst aspect you like about the company?
   - Why do you want to change?
   - What improvement would you suggest in your current job?
   - Is the job profile not as per your expectation?
   - What are the skill-sets and attributes needed in your current job?
   - Describe the difference between what was told to you at the time of joining and what you found in actual about your job?
   - Did the job help you in your career growth?
   - How do you rate your current pay and perks as compared to the offer on hands?
   - Did you find the company policies, rules and regulations facilitating or a hindrance?
• Identify where our company is doing well?

3) Managerial/Team Support
• Did you receive required guidance and support on the job?
• How do you rate or describe the quality of leadership of your immediate supervisor?
• Did you enjoy the support of your team members?
• Did you receive ongoing feedback on your performance?
• How was your role clarity? Was it well-defined or confusing?
• Was there scope for professional development?

4) General Issues
• What could we have done to retain you from leaving?
• What lesson will you take with you from the time you spent here?
• Were you satisfied with company training and development programmes?
• What were the specific reasons for accepting the new offer; what was the best part of the offer?
• Did you enjoy a balanced work life balance?
• Will you ever refer or recommend your friends for a job with us?

Cultural Factors
Any enterprise with an open, trust and transparent based work culture can always expect feedbacks from their departing employees since they have no fear of reprisal, victimization and harm coming to them for speaking out their feelings both pleasant and unpleasant. Whereas those companies which follow closed, autocratic and command-and-control work styles will have problems in eliciting honest feedback from their departing employees for fear of reprisal.

For such companies, exit interviews, if conducted through outside agencies, they can get real inputs for corrective actions. Research findings have established that 40% of the responses are found to be different when the exit interviews are conducted after the employees have left. (Source: Martin Burt Financial Post)

Conclusion
An effective and comprehensive exit interview finding will reflect the mirror image of the company work culture. It will help identify the changing trends in the industry. Exit interviews are a powerful source for review and modifications of the company policies, systems and management styles & keep pace with changing business realities. If actions are taken on the findings, it will not only prevent migration of the highfliers but the company can also retain and attract new talents for its competitive edge.

Exit interviews have become a powerful HR tool. As per the recent survey in US, 80% companies conduct exit interviews but only 1/3 of them act on the findings. Therefore, inaction on the findings is the main reason why exit interview fails to provide value addition to the company.

So, to derive maximum benefits out of the system, there has to be a built in mechanism in place for taking action on the findings of exit interview and make it mandatory and internalized as part of work culture. Otherwise the exit interview process will be an

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