

Missing the Mark: Conduct stay interviews to keep top talent



Stay interviews are a vital part of running a business and managing your people. The best-crafted succession plan is meaningless if the employees they hinge upon decide to leave the company. It's even more difficult to swallow if they leave for reasons that were well within your power to change. Don't wait until it's too late to check in with key performers, find out what's going well and what they'd like to see change while you still have time.

Let's look at one example of how succession planning can go wrong, and how the situation easily could have been avoided.

Laying the groundwork

Jose is a high performer who is often recognized for his hard work and dedication. Jayne, his manager, has named Jose as her future successor and has made recommendations to human resources and the company owner that Jose has the potential to be a key leader in the future.

Jayne tries to motivate her team through positive reinforcement, public feedback, and special outings once per month. She feels like she's being a good leader in applying what she's learned from numerous leadership courses.

Jose, although a high performer, is quieter than the other three people on the team who are more extroverted.

During team meetings, they speak up, challenge one another, and banter and joke. Jose participates and always has something to say, but, Jayne wishes he chatted more, so his peers and higher-ups could also see the long-term value that Jose brings to the organization. During development conversations, Jayne encourages Jose to speak up since she knows it will help his brand as an emerging leader within the organization.

Jayne has also talked to Jose about his career aspirations and he, too, has expressed his interest in moving up within the organization. Jayne assumes that Jose is happy within the role based on the conversations. And, in the next team meeting, she talks openly about a new business challenge that Jose has solved and also acknowledges his work at an all-hands meeting with everyone across the organization.

Jayne has also given Jose the opportunity to mentor and manage another member of the team to build his leadership experience. She often talks to her HR manager, Marcus, about her work with Jose. Marcus commends Jayne on being an influential leader within the organization and comments that he wishes other leaders within the organization were as involved with their employee development as Jayne is.

An unexpected twist

On a Friday morning, Jose sends Jayne a meeting request. Jayne accepts it and thinks it must be in relation to a new project that the two are working on. Jayne meets Jose in the conference room. She notices he only has a notebook in hand and no laptop. Her thoughts change — is something wrong and this isn't an impromptu project meeting?

The two take a seat at the table. Jose begins to tell Jayne how much he likes her and has enjoyed working for her. As he does, he pulls out a white piece of paper sliding it across the table to her. He's decided to leave. Jayne is shocked and disappointed. She's dedicated so much time and effort to Jose. How could he be doing this? Doesn't he know that he's a future leader here and valued?

"Jose, why do you want to leave?" she asks still in shock.

He begins. "I know you've done a lot for me and I really like it here. But, you keep giving me more projects and now are making me manage someone. I also don't like all the public feedback you give me in front of the team. They always tease me about it afterward and it embarrasses me. I found a new job that will let me work more independently and my new manager seems more in-tune with what I want and what motivates me."

Jayne thanks Jose for the feedback and goes to see Marcus to see if there's anything they can do to keep him. Marcus, too, is surprised. He tells Jayne there may be the budget to give Jose an increase, but it sounds like that's not what he's looking for. Instead, he's looking for a different type of manager and culture compared to the one Jayne is trying to create for her team.

He asks if she's ever asked Jose openly about what he wants compared to what she wants for him. She tells him no and he suggests having "Stay Interviews" with other members of the team to head off any other resignation.

She brings the offer to Jose. He says it's not about the money. Although disappointed, Jayne wishes him luck and the two begin to map his exit plan.

Lessons learned

Most would agree that Jayne meant well with her approach and had high hopes for Jose and his career. While she thought she was doing the best things for Jose, her efforts weren't aligned with his motivators and preferences. It's essential for leaders and HR managers to talk with employees about their future and development. The "Stay Interview" provides a unique dialog to confirm assumptions about employee preferences and goals. It's not good enough just to know someone wants to advance, you also need to understand how they work, if they feel comfortable with the team dynamic, and anything else on their mind.

If Jayne had taken the time to ask Jose specifically about his wants, his needs, and his preferences, she could have tailored her approach to one he was more comfortable with.