

5 Questions Every Manager Needs to Ask Their Direct Reports

Don't wait until their exit interview to find out what they really think.

by Susan Peppercorn

Sara, a departing employee, sat across from her company's HR leader for an exit interview. As a marketing executive for a financial services company, she was resigning after five years to take a CMO role at a fintech startup.

When the HR director asked Sara, "Is there anything else we could have done to keep you here?" Sara paused. "Yes. I wish there had been conversations about my career goals and opportunities for growth."

This is just one of the discussions that often takes place too late, after top talent is already on the way out.

As the number of workers quitting their jobs continues to swell amid the Great Resignation, soon-to-be-former employees are finding themselves in exit interviews with HR representatives who hope to gain a clearer sense of what's happening inside the company.

Workers want these questions to come from their manager proactively, rather than retroactively from HR.

With these five needs in mind, consider incorporating the questions below into routine check-ins with your direct reports, so that you can ask employees the questions they want to hear before they're gone:

1. How would you like to grow within this organization? Career development is the most critical of the elements identified by Gallup, and two-thirds of people - regardless of their level - leave their company because of a lack of career-development opportunities. With this in mind, it's important to figure out what growth opportunities each employee needs for optimum development, whether through sponsorship, coaching, mentoring, visibility, or challenging work assignments.

To get at the answer, you might also ask, "What role would you love to do (whether it exists or not), and what can I do as your manager to encourage your development in this company?"

2. Do you feel a sense of purpose in your job? For the five years that Sara worked for the financial services company that she was resigning from, she never felt that her work impacted people's lives in a meaningful way.

3. What do you need from me to do your best work? The most effective managers respect and care about their employees by knowing them as individuals, acknowledging their achievements, having performance conversations, and conducting formal reviews. These supportive behaviors build a work environment where employees feel safe experimenting with new ideas, sharing information, exploring development opportunities, and supporting each other.

4. What are we currently not doing as a company that you feel we should do? The best managers let workers know that their opinions count by promoting open dialogue and providing honest feedback on employees' opinions and suggestions, supporting good ideas and addressing unfeasible ones. By asking individual team members what they feel the company could do better, what market opportunities the organization might be missing.

5. Do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day? When Sara was in her marketing role, her concentration was on data analytics. Although she learned how to master analyzing customer use data, she never considered it one of her strengths. Her new role will allow her to concentrate on branding and audience acquisition, areas that she enjoys and excels in. Once again, her former employer missed an opportunity to harness the best of Sara's talents before she took them to a new organization.

To determine whether your employees are focusing on their strengths, you might also ask, "What *is* the best part of your job? Which of your talents are you not using in your current role? What part of your job would you eliminate if you could?"

When managers make *checking in with* these five questions a regular part of how they interact with their employees, it helps ensure that people feel seen and valued. And when managers help individuals on their teams feel that way, they're more likely to be rewarded by employees who become advocates for the department and organization, no matter how long they stay.

