# Stay Interview Guidelines *Measuring Employee Engagement and Retaining Top Talent \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

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**WHAT IS A STAY INTERVIEW?**

# A Stay Interview is a structured discussion a leader conducts with each individual employee to learn the specific actions he or she must take to strengthen that employee’s engagement and retention with the organization. Stay Interviews provide individual level information, and allow for the identification of trends and themes among all employees. When done correctly, Stay Interviews also encourage supervisor engagement with staff and the building of a trusting relationship.

# BENEFITS OF CONDUCTING STAY INTERVIEWS

* **Increased employee engagement:** Employees who have a say in their workplace will be more engaged and invested in the Institute’s success.
* **Targeted actions:** Stay interviews provide specific information that can help supervisors target issues and reinforce factors that motivate their employees.
* **Improved individual effectiveness and performance:** Highly motivated and engaged employees are generally more productive.
* **Fewer surprises for supervisors:** Identifying issues early can help supervisors avoid a last minute scramble to cover duties and recruit.
* **Improved supervisor/employee working relationships:** Open and honest communication builds trust between supervisors and employees.
* **Improved retention rates:** Employees who are satisfied with their workplace are less likely to look for another job.

**KEY ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE STAY INTERVIEWS**

**Conducted by supervisors vs. HR**

* The supervisor directly above the employee should conduct the interview to demonstrate interest in the employee’s retention and increase trust in the employee/supervisor relationship.
* Each level of the workforce should interview with their direct reports, beginning with senior leadership and cascading down to first line supervisors.

**Retain employees and reassure top talent**

* Let employees know that the Stay Interview is being conducted to help retain talent.
* Let top performers know they are top performers.
* Gather stay and leave reasons from all levels of performers; focus resulting actions on retaining employees with the highest impact on the organization.

**Trust is key**

* Trust between supervisor/employee is highly correlated to employee retention, and is critical to the effectiveness of a Stay Interview.
* Where trust may be an initial concern, supervisors should employ less invasive or sensitive questions.
* Make sure actions from the Stay Interview benefit the employee and do not negatively impact elements of trust.

**STAY INTERVIEW PROCESS**

**Interviewer skills**

* Be committed to making positive changes before conducting stay interviews.
* Conversations should be brief (20-30 minutes) and informal.
* Take the employee’s style and preferences into consideration when preparing for the conversation to help establish an open environment (e.g. sharing the questions in advance).
* Start with positive questions.
* Stay focused on the conversation; refrain from taking notes during the discussion; jot down specific actionable requests and general feedback afterwards.
* Stay Interviews should be conversational, and contain a limited number (no more than five) of structured questions.
* Be a great listener and show genuine interest in the employee’s views and goals.
* Remember to probe, but read the level of comfort expressed by the employee during the interview.
* Be careful not to trivialize how employees feel even if you disagree with their views.

**Scheduling**

* Make sure that Stay Interviews are scheduled independent from formal performance reviews and discussions.
* Consider an initial Stay Interview within 3 months after onboarding a new employee.
* Repeat annually/as needed: Keep Stay Interviews as a recurring process to re-enforce the supervisor/employee relationship.

**Taking action and developing a plan**

* Create an Action Plan following the initial Stay Interview and determine:
  + What the manager/supervisor will do
  + What the employee will do
  + When the action items should be accomplished
  + The next meeting date to follow up
* Make sure at least one identified employee issue is addressed closely following the Stay Interview.
* When making changes, inform employees that the changes are the result of their suggestions and responses.
* Report general themes that are of concern to your supervisor for possible action (remember to remove any PII).

# SAMPLE EMAILS TO YOUR STAFF – PLEASE PERSONALIZE!

Reach out to your employees and let them know you want to schedule a short, informational conversation with them. Being transparent about your intentions with the conversation can alleviate unnecessary anxiety. Below are several sample emails for your preference.

| **Sample A**  Dear\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_:  I’d like to meet with you to learn more about your work experience and how different aspects motivate and de-motivate you. Specifically, I’d like to better understand what about your work is important to you, how we are utilizing your talents, what keeps you motivated and dedicated to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and how I can better assist you as a supervisor.  Please schedule a 30 minute block of time with me in the next few weeks so we can chat.  Thanks! |
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|  |
| **Sample B**  Dear \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_:  You make a difference and I value your contributions, so I would like to discuss some things that are important to you and me:  What keeps you here?  What might entice you away?  What is most energizing about your work?  Are we fully utilizing your talents?  What is inhibiting your success?  What can I do differently to best assist you?  Please schedule a 30 minute block of time with me in the next few week so we can chat.  Thank you! |
|  |
| **Sample C**  Dear \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_:  You make a difference and I value your contributions. I’d like to better understand what about your work is important to you, how we are utilizing your talents, what keeps you motivated and dedicated to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and how I can better assist you as a supervisor. Our HR representative, (insert name), will be facilitating “stay conversations” with individual employees to gather this information and will be sharing the results with me. Please schedule a meeting with (insert name) to discuss your experiences at the workplace.  Thanks! |

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

Below is a list of possible questions. Feel free to modify the language and remember you do not need to ask every question to every person. Select the questions that are most appropriate for your/their situation:

**Opening**

* What do you think about on your way to work?
* What about your job makes you excited to come to work?
* What makes for a great day at work?
* What is one the thing that would make your job more satisfying and rewarding?
* What about your job keeps you up at night?
* What bothers you most about your job?
* Is there anything you’d like to change about your job?
* Do you feel that you are part of a bigger vision and mission? Why or why not?
* Do you believe that your work has meaning? How can we work together to make your work more meaningful?

**Skills/Talent Utilization**

* Do you think your current position fully utilizes your talents?
* What talents, interests or skills do you have that are not being used at your current role?
* What part of your role is most challenging? What is least challenging?
* Do you feel that you are being recognized for your work?
* How do you like to be recognized?

**Professional/Career Development**

* What is your dream job? Can the Division/Office/Center support your progress toward it? If so, how?
* Do you feel supported in your career goals?
* Is the organization providing you with opportunities to grow and develop as a person and as a professional? What would improve your opportunities?
* Are you satisfied with the training and development you have received? Do you have an IDP? A mentor?
* Do you know what career opportunities you’d like to pursue with our organization? Can you see yourself accomplishing them here?
* Do you have anything new you would like to learn this year?
* Is there anything that would help progress your career development that you are reluctant to ask about?

**Environment**

* Are you treated respectfully by your coworkers?
* What type of feedback would you like to receive about your performance that you are not receiving now? From me? From coworkers?
* Do you feel that you have the necessary control over your job to perform most successfully and productively?

**Leadership**

* Do you respect the amount and kind of leadership and guidance that you receive from the senior managers?
* Do you trust the senior leaders?
* What can I do as a manager to best support you?
* What can I do more of or less of as your manager?

**Work/Life Balance**

* What kinds of flexibility would be helpful to you in balancing your work and home life?

**Closing**

* Have you ever considered leaving? If so, what are the specific reasons that would cause you to leave? What would make you stay?
* What can I do (as a manager) to help you stay?
* Do you have suggestions about how we can improve as an organization?
* Is there anything else that is important to you that we did not cover during this meeting?

**STAY INTERVIEW FOLLOW-UP RESOURCES**

Stay interviews may reveal information that requires assistance from outside resources. Concerns that may require further discussion outside of the stay interview could include Ethics, Work/Life Balance, Work Schedule (Teleworking, Alternative Work Schedules etc.), Reassignment, Training and Development (Leadership Programs, Coaching, etc.). The following resources and point of contacts are available for supervisors to address those issues.

**Employee & Labor Relations Branch  
Workforce Relations Division**

31 Center Drive

Bldg. 31, Room B3C08; Mail Stop 2211

Bethesda, MD 20814

Employee Relations

Phone: 301-402-9203

<https://hr.od.nih.gov/hrguidance/er/default.htm>

The NIH Civil Program

Phone: 301-40C-IVIL (301-402-4845)

<https://hr.od.nih.gov/hrguidance/civil/>

**NIH Employee Assistance Program**

Building 31, Room B2B57

9000 Rockville Pike

Bethesda, MD 20892

Phone: 301-496-3164

Fax: 301-496-3845

**NIH Office of the Ombudsman**

**Center for Cooperative Resolution**

31 Center Drive, MSC 2087

Bethesda, MD 20892-2087

Phone: 301-594-7231

Fax: 301-594-7948

**TIPS ON HANDLING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

While most of the stay interview is focused on identifying and reinforcing the positive factors, some negative factors might also be identified. For example, some employees might make a difficult or unreasonable request or share negative feedback. The excerpt below was written to address how to handle negative feedback, but the principles can also be applied to address difficult questions and requests.

| **Step 1:** Make yourself listen without speaking or defending yourself as you receive the feedback. Remember, even if you completely disagree with the feedback, chances are there is some basis to it or you would not be hearing it.  **Step 2:** Paraphrase what you perceive you heard. By rephrasing the feedback you received, you can clarify what you think you heard and make sure you understand the comments. Ask the person if you just paraphrased correctly. This may open a dialogue in which you can have a constructive discussion about the situation.  **Step 3:** Restrain yourself from reacting to the negative feedback. If you react, you will not be in a position of learning and improving.  **Step 4:** Thank the person for sharing [his or] her thoughts and opinions with you. Tell the person you want to use the feedback to improve, and you plan to spend time thinking about how you can make adjustments. Tell the person you will reply to the feedback after you think about it.  **Step 5:** Think about the feedback as objectively as you can. Analyze the person’s motivation for the feedback, and determine what his [or her] concerns may be. Consider the feedback a glimpse into your weak areas, affording you a perspective you can use to improve. Instead of immediately discarding the feedback, use it as a tool to sharpen and correct weak spots.  **Step 6:** Ask for input from other people you trust. Whether an advisor, mentor, supervisor or colleague, share the negative feedback you received and ask for objective opinions. Ask the person if he [or she] thinks the feedback has legitimacy. Listen carefully to the comments and thoughts you receive.  **Step 7:** Reply to the feedback after taking the time to think and analyze. Share your thoughts about the feedback, specifically noting the points in which you agree or disagree. Give reasons for your agreement or disagreement, but keep the conversation constructive. Direct the conversation toward a positive plan for the future, if possible.  *Hatter, K., How to Deal with Negative Feedback at Work. Retrieved from* [*http://smallbusiness.chron.com/deal-negative-feedback-work-21726.html*](http://smallbusiness.chron.com/deal-negative-feedback-work-21726.html) |
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