



USE EXIT INTERVIEWS TO IMPROVE YOUR FIRM

Ellen Freedman, CLM
© 2005 Freedman Consulting, Inc.

Sally is a well-respected secretary at a law firm. For several years she has been a good solid team player supporting two busy attorneys. Her reviews have been excellent. One day Sally gives her notice because her husband's employer is transferring him to another city, and it's a good career opportunity. The office manager knows that Sally enjoyed her job, and because she also knows the reason for Sally's resignation, she does not think it necessary to question her about her perceptions of the firm before departure.

Todd is an overly aggressive attorney who does nice work, but he alienates the staff and does not get along well with his department head. He tends to leave everything go to the last minute, and often takes out his resulting stress on anyone unfortunate enough to cross his path as he rushes to meet his deadlines. And he frequently does not return calls to clients promptly. The firm's dissatisfaction with Todd's work habits and interpersonal skills are a frequent source of discussion with the department head and office manager. His file has been thoroughly documented regarding these discussions, and his raises have reflected the firm's opinion. Todd is resentful that these "soft" issues get in the way of reviews that properly recognize what he considers his superior professional skills. After a few years of this, Todd tenders his resignation, announcing he has obtained a position at a competing law firm. Because the department head and office manager are actually relieved that Todd has chosen to move on voluntarily, they do not feel it necessary to ask him about his perceptions of the firm before departure.

These are fairly typical scenarios of staff departures at today's law firm. But in both cases the firms have failed to take advantage of a unique opportunity to obtain candid feedback which might enable it to more successfully attract and retain desirable employees in the future. Every employee departure presents an opportunity to the firm to obtain candid feedback through an exit interview or survey. An interview is conducted in person. A survey is done by using a questionnaire. Although a survey is better than nothing, it lacks the opportunity to expand upon and explore comments and observations. An interview, on the other hand, can be extremely revealing because problem areas can be explored in depth to fully understand the employee's perspective.

To conduct the interview well, the interviewer must assume an active listening mode. The interviewer may not agree with what is being said, but it is very important not to disagree in any way, or try to explain or justify what the staff person states was objectionable about their employment. Rather, the interviewer wants to fully understand the perspective and perceptions of the employee. It is exactly those perceptions and perspectives, where negative, that the firm needs to address. So you want them to flow freely, by encouraging the employee to expound further, which can only happen if she/he does not detect disagreement on the part of the interviewer.

The firm will want to know what the employee felt overall about the firm environment, and his/her immediate supervisor. Was the training the firm provided adequate? If not, find out specifically where it was lacking, and what the consequences were for the employee. Did the firm provide adequate resources to allow the employee to effectively perform the job? If not, find out what was lacking, and how it impacted the employee.

You want to find out whether the employee would recommend the firm as a place of employment for others. The answer to this question is often very surprising. This is where you can find out that your firm's environment may be perceived very differently by your employees than how you "sell" it to the outside world and see it yourself. I frequently find this to be true when I do law firm practice audits. Typically, when there is a large disparity between the firm's image of itself and the employee's image of the firm, there is high turnover.

The firm should determine whether the employee considers the benefits provided by the firm to be below average, average or excellent. Any answer other than excellent should be further explored to determine what would make it excellent for the employee. Sometimes employers waste money on benefits which are of little interest and value to employees, and miss very affordable alternatives which would have a far greater impact on employee satisfaction.

Were the policies of the firm uniformly applied throughout the office? If not, try to get a few specific examples of where they were not, so you know where to shore up your management expertise. Would the employee choose to work for the firm again in the future? Again, many firms would be surprised at the answer given by what appears to be an otherwise happy employee.

What the firm does with the information is a whole other story. Sometimes the tendency is to dismiss whatever is said because we believe that the perception of the employee is wrong. Keep in mind that while their facts may be wrong, and



while their interpretation of intentions may be wrong, their perception is *always* valid. And most likely that employee's perception may be shared by others. When it is negative the firm must address it so that future employees and applicants have a more positive perception.

No matter how often you ask for candid feedback from current employees, and no matter how many anonymous surveys you conduct, you will never have as valuable an opportunity to find out about how your firm is perceived by employees than during an exit interview. Take advantage of the opportunity every time it presents itself. Try to find ways to improve the firm's management based on the feedback. There is no doubt that you will wind up with a more attractive firm for current and future employees, and ultimately reduce turnover.

A version of this article originally appeared in the 9/2/02 issue of the Pennsylvania Bar News

©2005 Freedman Consulting, Inc. The information in this article is protected by U.S. copyright. Visitors may print and download one copy of this article solely for personal and noncommercial use, provided that all hard copies contain all copyright and other applicable notices contained in the article. You may not modify, distribute, copy, broadcast, transmit, publish, transfer or otherwise use any article or material obtained from this site in any other manner except with written permission of the author. The article is for informational use only, and does not constitute legal advice or endorsement of any particular product or vendor.

