Closing Time: Effective Exit Interviews

By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices

"Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end…" – *Closing Time*, Semisonic

Upon learning that an employee or volunteer will be leaving your nonprofit, you might schedule a time for the departing team member to turn in their keys, return equipment, and receive a briefing on post employment benefits. Departing board members often receive a thank you card signed by the staff, or even a decorative plaque or paperweight.

Yet the most important pre-departure step is often skipped: the *exit interview*. Three of the most common reasons for skipping exit interviews include:

- **Lame duck syndrome**: some employers believe that departing employees 'check out' of the nonprofit's mission the day they announce their intent to leave. Others believe that departing staff are 'lame ducks' with little to offer.
- **Sour grapes and awkward avoidance**: If you've ever accepted the resignation of a high-performing employee, you've probably felt disappointed, frustrated or even envious. And when it's time to lay-off or terminate an employee, many managers try to avoid what is often an awkward goodbye.
- **Time constraints**: exit interviews are easy to cut out of our busy lives; but we *know* they can provide insights that benefit our missions, so we need to start making time.

Employee departures may be a bit awkward, but they are a wonderful opportunity to strengthen the mission and effectiveness of your nonprofit.

Five of the most common mistakes made in conducting exit interviews include:

1. Narrowing the scope of the interview to focus only on obtaining physical items the employee used during the course of employment
2. Having the departing employee's supervisor conduct the interview
3. Not conducting interviews with staff members who were terminated for cause
4. Failing to ask the employee's views about their experience working for the nonprofit
5. Requiring the employee to schedule the exit interview himself/herself.

Seize the Day

Resolve to conduct exit interviews with every departing employee and departing long-time volunteer or board member–*regardless of the reason for the departure*. Here are a few tips on getting your exit strategy right.

- Identify a neutral staff (or board) member to champion and conduct most exit interviews. In a large nonprofit with an HR department, one or more members of the HR team should be trained to conduct exit interviews.
- Schedule exit interviews as soon as you know that an employee will be leaving. It doesn't need to be on the employee's last day.
- Use a consistent set of questions for all staff exit interviews.
- Invite the employee to provide feedback on their experience, including the quality of supervision, adequacy of compensation, and what they liked and didn't like about working at the nonprofit.
- Ask every departing employee whether they "witnessed or experienced any illegal harassment or discrimination" during their period of service.
- Ask departing board members: were your talents and skills used appropriately? If we could call on you in the future to do one thing to support our mission, what would it be?

What If I'm the Exiting Employee?

Someday you might sever ties with the nonprofit you currently work for; you might even be planning your exit right now. If you truly care about your nonprofit's mission and the wellbeing of your workplace, then take full advantage of the exit interview when it's your turn to exit. Follow these helpful tips from a June 2015 *Forbes* article, *Exit Interview Do's and Don'ts*.

- **Remember that good endings make good beginnings**. Don't burn the bridge with your soon-to-be ex-employer, especially if you want to use the employer as a reference or you might want to return to that organization in the future. If needed, find an appropriate outlet through which to vent your complaints before your exit interview. Though the interviewer will ask you for candid feedback, they will not want to hear your complaints. The article offers a pointed reminder that "Your time to talk about concerns was while you were employed."
- **Prepare for the exit interview as you would a job interview**. To leave one final, positive impact at your nonprofit, approach the exit interview in a thoughtful manner. You have an opportunity to offer big-picture advice about how the nonprofit can further advance its mission, and you can leave behind insights that will aid the next person who serves in your role.

For help instituting or improving exit interviews at your nonprofit, join our Affiliate Membership program to access an exclusive webinar on exit interviews. For additional tips on managing the end of relationships with employees, volunteers and vendors, see the Center's article, *Happy Endings*. For specific tips on board member exit interviews, see Carol Weisman's blog at https://carolweisman.wordpress.com/2010/08/26/exit-interviews-for-board-members/.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your feedback on this article or questions about risk issues at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.