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Unfair Treatment Causes Employees to Leave

When employees experience real – and perceived – injustices at work... it can directly impact their ability to cope with work and their performance.

When employees feel they're singled out for mistreatment from their bosses... it can change their work-related attitudes and increase the risk they'll quit.

This seems self-evident.

And now it's confirmed in research by Michael S. Cole, assistant professor of management at Texas Christian University's Neeley School of business. The research tracked the downward spiral that follows when an employee experiences real – or perceived – injustices at work. Experiencing real or perceived injustice causes major stress. It can lead to damaged psychological health and extreme emotional exhaustion. It can directly impact the employee's work and negatively affect productivity.

The research involved data from 869 military personnel and civil servants. The study published in the October 2009 issue of the *Journal of Management Studies* states, "Our findings suggest that individuals' injustice perceptions are related to their psychological health." Further, "our study indicated that perceptions of unfairness may take an emotional toll on individuals, thereby disrupting organizational attitudes and behavioral intentions."

Participants in the research responded to questions like these:

- Is your outcome (such as pay, promotions, recognition on the job) appropriate for the work you have completed?
- Does your outcome reflect what you have contributed to the organization?
- Is your outcome justified, given your performance?
- Has your (superior/supervisor) treated you in a polite manner?
- Has your (superior/supervisor) treated you with dignity?
- Has your (superior/supervisor) treated you with respect?
- Has your (superior/supervisor) been candid in communications with you?
- Has your (superior/supervisor) explained the procedures thoroughly?
- Were the explanations regarding the procedures reasonable?

Participants also responded to statements about responses to their perceived injustices. Some examples:

What to Ask in Stay Interviews



Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans collected many Stay Interview questions from managers for their book *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em*. Here are a number of them:

- Q.** What about your job makes you jump out of bed in the morning?
- Q.** What about your job makes you hit the snooze button?
- Q.** If you were to win the lottery and resign, what would you miss the most about your job?
- Q.** What would be the one thing that, if it changed in your current role, would make you consider moving on?
- Q.** As your manager, what could I do a little more of or a little less of?
- Q.** What do you need to learn to work at your best?
- Q.** What makes for a great day?
- Q.** What can we do to make your job

- Unwilling to put in effort beyond that normally expected in order to help the organization be successful.
- Feeling embarrassed to tell others that I am a part of this organization.
- This organization really inspires the very best in me in the way of job performance. (A low score on this statement indicated an attitude of withdrawal from work, or "checking out" from work without actually quitting.)
- Often think about quitting my job at this organization.
- Will probably look for a new job in the near future.

The published report states, "Simply put, managers who are perceived to make unfair decisions or act in a disrespectful manner can deplete subordinates' valued resources." Cole defines "valued resources" as employees' "emotional, mental and physical energies."

Cole further explains that many perceived, day-to-day injustices might seem trivial on their own. But "in the aggregate [they] have severe implications for one's well-being."

The "targets of injustices," Cole says, "are also likely to feel unsatisfied with their jobs as a whole leading to adverse changes in their job-related attitudes and behavior. This in turn leads to a general depletion in their sense of commitment to the organization, and in the worst-case... an increased risk of voluntary turnover..."

Adds Cole, "Trivial injustices – believing the decisions are not properly explained, being treated unfairly or in an impolite manner by a supervisor – can actually trigger an unfavorable chain of events that includes stress reactions in the form of emotional exhaustion and subsequent organizational withdrawal and voluntary turnover."

more satisfying?

Q. Do you get enough recognition? How do you like to be recognized?

Q. What would you change if you could?

Don't avoid doing Stay Interviews because of a fear that the employee will just ask for more pay. Says Kaye, "I ask managers what it is that's keeping them from asking employees these questions? They say, 'Well, what if they ask about money?' I tell them, 'If you can't give them more money, tell them that. Then tell them you want to figure out something you can do, and ask what it is about the job they like most.'"

Use "Stay Interviews" to Keep Employees

One strategy workplace leaders can use to counteract perceived injustice in the workplace and increase retention is to commit to using "Stay Interviews."

Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans, co-authors of *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay* (now in its 4th edition), explain the value of the Stay Interview and how to do this interview. Kaye is founder and CEO of Career Systems International and Jordan-Evans is president of the Jordan Evans Group.



Kaye urges acting before employees get the urge to quit. "The whole idea of the Stay Interview," she says, "comes from observing that when most managers ask the question 'What can I do to keep you?' it's when the employee already has one foot out the door. And often that's too late."

"We suggest the manager ask the question earlier," says Kaye. "We call it a 'Stay Interview' instead of an Exit Interview. What's important is that the manager listen very carefully to what the employee says, what they care about their job, and what they want most. If the manager listens carefully enough, and asks 'What else?' and 'What else?'

enough, they'll get three or four things they actually can take action on."

"There is nothing more important for a manager to do than to conduct a Stay Interview with every talented employee, the employees you want to keep," says Jordan-Evans. "There are two reasons this is true. First, the simple act of telling employees how valuable they are to you and the team and asking them what matters most, what they want from you and from their work, will make them feel terrific. Second, the information you gather will allow you to customize your engagement and retention strategies for each of your talented people."

Jordan-Evans tells of a bank manager who said to her, "If I asked people these kinds of questions, they'd fall

over in a dead faint. I don't even say 'Hi' in the hallway." She responded, ""You might want to ease into this then. Start with 'Hi' in the hallway."" Jordan-Evans agrees it's true these Stay Interview conversations "work best when there is already a trusting relationship between employee and boss." But, she continues, "Here's the paradox. These conversations build trust. So gather up your courage and conduct Stay Interviews."

Kaye, in discussing the value of Stay Interviews, explains: "A Stay Interview can help the leader, forces the leader to get curious about their own employees. The more the leader comes from curiosity the more they will learn about their employee and what makes them click. And the less chance they will have of turning off the employee. Often I do something about my behavior that turns off an employee that's an easy habit to break. And by asking, if I get a hint of what it is, I can break it."

How often to do a Stay Interview? Kaye and Jordan-Evans suggest these possibilities as effective, easy times for workplace leaders to do Stay Interviews with employees valuable to the success of the organization: At orientation of new employees. During performance appraisals. At the start of each quarter.