

Exit Interview: Make a Good Last Impression

By Beth Braccio Hering, Guest Contributor on November 29, 2011



You've cleaned out your desk and said goodbye to your colleagues. All that is left is an exit interview before heading out to your terrific new **job** — and that's only a formality nobody takes seriously. Right?

Not so fast. Final impressions are lasting impressions. Rushing through an exit interview with careless answers or treating it as your personal venting session can have repercussions. Maintain your dignity (and make the company wistful about the employee it's losing) by doing these five things:

1. Prepare

Scared of getting tongue-tied and mumbling something you'll regret? Spend some time beforehand thinking about issues that usually come up during an exit interview.

Lisa Quast, author of *Your Career, Your Way!* and president of Career Woman Inc. in Seattle, Wash., notes that most **HR departments** use a standard list of questions for exit interviews. She suggests being prepared to articulate:

- Your reasons for leaving the company.
- Your level of satisfaction with managers, co-workers, company culture, compensation/benefits and opportunities for career development.
- Things about the new company that influenced your decision to leave this job.

2. Mention the Positives

From a manager who went out of his way to be helpful to a noteworthy flex-time policy, chances are there is someone or something in the company you're leaving worthy of praise. The exit interview is a great time to give recognition. Such actions show that you have thoughtfully contemplated your experience with this employer, and the feedback is valuable to the company in determining what it is doing right.

3. Present Negatives with Care

Some departing employees view the exit interview as their big chance to sound off. Before presenting a laundry list of complaints, however, remember that exit interview information is not always kept confidential.

A good tactic is to offer constructive criticism on a few key topics. "Avoid generalities such as 'I can't stand my boss' or 'My co-workers are annoying,'" Quast says. "Instead, use professionalism and respect to provide specifics, such as 'I find it difficult working for a manager who does not create agendas with objectives for meetings because it makes me nervous not knowing how I should prepare' or 'I find it difficult trying to complete my work each day because my cubicle is right next to the call center.'"

4. Keep Emotions in Check

Want to yell about the promotion that should have been yours? While it may feel good in the moment to get something off your chest, chances are that your actions are being directed to the wrong person at the wrong time.

"An angry departure and finger pointing serve no purpose at the tail end," says Roy Cohen, a career coach and author of *The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide*. "Exit interviews are not the time to set the record straight. What you say and how you say it will be final. It will be a permanent record. Also, the interviews are usually conducted by a representative from the HR department, not someone who has the power to make change or to really do anything meaningful with the information you share."

Another danger of a rant is that it can raise eyebrows — at you. As Cohen notes, "If an event is so outrageous and inappropriate that you have no choice but to express your anger and rage, consider the following: Why haven't you come forth sooner or hired legal representation to protect yourself?"

5. Refrain from Burning Bridges

Finally, remember that the future is unpredictable. While you may believe you're out the door for good, there's always the chance that you might want to work for this company again at a later time. Likewise, you may encounter ex-colleagues at a future workplace or at professional events, so leaving on civil terms is advantageous.

"In a world where job security and the likelihood of moving again and again are a reality, there is no point in burning a bridge," Cohen says. "You will need to rely on your old boss or other senior managers for a reference. Time erases most memories of difficult relationships and challenging work situations. But bosses who have been criticized never forget."