

# COMMUNICATION SKILLS

What do exit interviews, childcare policies and time management have in common? Communication, says Stewart Forsyth who discusses three situations where talking things through can provide the best solutions.



## Exit interviews

**Turnover in my organisation is high and I would like to implement an exit interview process to help find out why. What do I need to do to ensure it is successful?**

Paying attention to voluntary staff turnover (VSTO), and finding what pushes it up or down, is one of the most important HR priorities. Is your VSTO a competitive disadvantage? Staff turnover in some industries does run high (law firms for example). And there is evidence that industries employing lower-skilled staff gain economic advantage in not letting VSTO go too low.

If you want to manage VSTO I would suggest using annual staff surveys that include questions about 'intention to leave'. This way you get an indication about where in your business you have greater risk of VSTO, and you can complete statistical 'driver' analysis to identify what is behind such intentions. That gives you more timely information to manage the issue. After all, by the time you're doing an exit interview, you've lost the person.

Exit interviews are definitely part of the mix. I recommend interviews rather than questionnaires, preferably with a moderately independent person (such as someone from HR). You are more likely to get meaningful information through an interview as you are able to communicate that you do value the

person's contribution. It also gives you the chance to enrol them to promote your organisation to future candidates, or even promote the idea of them returning in the future (boomerangs usually make great hires).

It's useful to ask 'When did you first think of leaving?', then follow up to find what was going on then. This gives you better information than 'Why are you leaving?' which encourages people to rationalise.

## Staying over

**We have a single parent on staff who is occasionally required to spend a night out of town on business and who has asked us to reimburse the cost of providing overnight childcare. Is this our responsibility?**

There is no statutory obligation on the employer to pay for the employee's childcare arrangements. However, the employer should check the terms and conditions of the employee's employment agreement and any family friendly policies or practices carefully. Assuming the agreement is silent and there is no policy or practice to that effect, then there is no obligation to reimburse.

Note that apart from the immediate question of whether the employer has an obligation to reimburse, well-intentioned but broadly written policies can create other unintended obligations. For example, a policy may oblige an employer to consider reimbursement in good faith as

opposed to simply having a blanket policy of not reimbursing childcare arrangements.

In most cases employers specify the need for such travel during the interview process and the prospective employee agrees (or not) to the position with that understanding. If there is no clear agreement to travel, then the employer's ability to require the employee to travel may itself become an issue.

Of course, when travel requirements are discussed during selection interviews, it is unlikely the employer will enquire into childcare arrangements as that may be deemed to demonstrate an intention to discriminate. Therefore, unless the employer has a policy or practice of reimbursing, the onus is effectively on the employee to raise the matter.

Whether prospective or current employees are comfortable raising this issue during bargaining is another question again.

*(Thanks to Rodger Pool of ELR Consulting for his ideas on childcare support for the solo parent.)*

## Open all hours

**We have an open door policy in my workplace but some of our managers complain it is a burden and a distraction from their work? What's the solution?**

Tell them not to take it too literally. After all, if they were out visiting a client or a supplier or had someone visiting them, then their door wouldn't be open.

Sometimes, however, it is important to be able to get the head down and do the work. Perhaps they could book a meeting room or head to a café or the local library if they want to block some time out for concentrated work. Or they could put a notice on their door—'Tied up in a meeting, please write a time for when you would like to meet. I'll get back to you to confirm it'—and attach the week's schedule so that staff can book time in free slots.

Another suggestion. Advise the manager to stand up when someone comes in and have the meeting by their white-board—these go faster.

The evidence is that a manager is doing good managing if staff believe in the vision their manager is communicating, that they are seen to live the firm's values, to encourage team-work, that they give clear work instructions, and they provide good feedback.

All this is helped by a manager who is visible and accessible. But measure the important thing—whether staff feel they are being led—rather than whether doors are always open. **et**

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