

You need to prepare for the tricky moment when someone resigns from your team

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If you've ever quit a job, you probably remember that awkward conversation when you told your manager you were leaving. How did your manager respond? And how did that response make you feel about the organisation you were leaving?

With our co-authors ([Belinda Rae](#) and [Shruti R Sardeshmukh](#)) we interviewed employees who had voluntarily left a fulltime job. We examined the 'exit conversations' between employees and their managers to see how these conversations affect post-exit relationships.

Employers benefit from maintaining post-exit relationships with former employees. Former employees can become ambassadors who promote the organisation's products and services or recommend the organisation as a good place to work. But not all employees are motivated to maintain ties with their former employers.

We identified two distinct patterns of exit conversations. One pattern produced clean breakups with high potential for positive post-exit relationships; the other generated messy breakups with low potential.

It's not you, it's me (really)!

A 'shock' is a jarring event that motivates an employee to review their employer-organisation relationship and consider quitting. Dave quit his job when he received a scholarship for a Masters degree he wanted to pursue. Sharon quit hers after a headhunter called with a salary offer she couldn't refuse. But before the shocks, both Dave and Sharon were generally happy with their jobs and their organisations.

When the decision to leave was motivated by an external shock, employees were direct and honest with their managers. In response, managers expressed appreciation for the exiting employee's past contributions; they wished the exiting employee luck in the future and encouraged the employee to keep in touch. As a result, employees exited feeling positive about the organisation. They were motivated to recommend the organisation to customers and

employees, to use the organisation's products and services themselves, and even to consider rejoining the organisation down the track.

I'm trying to tell you (but you're not listening)!

Pamela had repeatedly discussed her workload with her manager; when nothing changed, she quit without having another opportunity lined up. John left his job after a particularly harsh performance review. John had never liked the role he'd been assigned after a restructure, and this performance review was the 'last straw.'

In these cases, the employee's motivation for leaving was something integral to the employee-organisation relationship – a heavy workload or an unrewarding assignment. Employees struggled to express their dissatisfaction to their managers. At first, they 'beat around the bush': they joked about quitting or took extended periods of leave. But these 'warning shots' went right over their managers' heads. The unhappy employees' indirect signals were not strong enough to launch frank conversations about the problem or to generate solutions.

Over time, the employees' dissatisfaction intensified and their signals became more and more direct. Eventually they presented their resignations as *faits accomplis*, leaving managers no wiggle room for last-chance relationship recoveries. Unfortunately, most managers didn't respond well to *faits accomplis*. They failed to express appreciation for the exiting employee's contributions and ignored the employee's attempts to initiate a post-exit relationship. Some managers pointedly avoided the exiting employee; others punished the employee with disparaging remarks.

These managerial reactions escalated the employees' earlier dissatisfaction and sometimes generated vendettas. One exiting employee actively discouraged members of her network from using the organisation's services; another decided to take formal legal action against his employer.

Write a better script!

We found that exits motivated by external shocks aren't a big problem for managers. Managers who engage in open dialogue with their subordinates might be better able to predict the shocks that might motivate an employee to leave. But even when managers are caught by surprise, they recover quickly and say the right thing at the right time. They successfully open the door to a positive post-exit relationship.

The challenge for managers is when an employee leaves because of problems in the employment relationship. Training may help managers learn to recognise the subtle signals that precede a *fait accompli* exit. And when the employee's exit decision is final, we encourage managers to incorporate two specific behaviours into their exit conversations. First, directly express appreciation for services the employee has already contributed. Even weak performers or difficult-to-manage employees can be acknowledged this way. Second, explicitly mention the organisation's desire to maintain a relationship post-exit. This doesn't necessarily mean expressing an interest in rehiring the employee. But a manager can encourage the exiting employee to remain a customer or subscribe to the organisation's newsletter.

Sometimes breaking up is hard to do...but if the exit conversation is handled well, it may transform an employment relationship rather than completely end it.



Notes:

- This post is based on the authors' paper [Can we still be friends? The role of exit conversations in facilitating post-exit relationships](#), co-authored by Carol T. Kulik, Belinda Rae, Shruti R. Sardeshmukh and Sanjeewa Perera, in *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 54(6), 893–912.
- This post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.

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