

# Curb the Tempt



Before workers get lured away, offer guidance to them and managers on having stay conversations.

BY TINA ROBINSON

**T**anya sat down with her manager for their weekly one-on-one chat. “I have some news you aren’t going to like,” she said to Marco. “I’m giving my two-week notice. I’ve accepted another opportunity.”

Marco looked at Tanya with wide eyes and responded, “I am so surprised by this news. I thought you were really enjoying your work.”

Tanya sighed. “Well, I do enjoy most of what I do. But it’s been two years, and I am doing pretty much the same thing I did when I started,” she explained. “I’ve become bored—I’m not excited to start the week, and I look way too forward to Fridays. Plus, I’ve been taking classes to expand my skill set and don’t feel that new knowledge is valued. This other opportunity is much more motivating.”

Fighting a groan, Marco asked, “Why didn’t you tell me all that? We could have figured out new projects. This company is growing, and there are so many cool programs that need our support. I assumed you liked being good at what you did and wanted to keep doing it.”

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“I wish you had asked,” she responded. “And I wish I had felt comfortable telling you how I felt. I just didn’t realize how disengaged I was until the recruiter called me.”

Does that scenario sound familiar? Have you been Tanya, uncertain how to ask for what you want out of work? Or have you been Marco, making assumptions about your team members’ motivations and engagement? Or maybe you’ve been on both sides of the conversation.

### **Should I stay or should I go?**

The Great Resignation is really the Great Reflection. Workers across industries are examining their relationship with their jobs, evaluating how effectively their employers are meeting their professional and personal needs. If there’s a decent match, many stay. If there’s a gap, it’s a job seeker’s market with enticing opportunities elsewhere.

English rock band The Clash described the reflection in its 1981 song lyrics: “This indecision’s buggin’ me. If you don’t want me, set me free. Exactly who am I supposed to be?” Employees are determining in their own ways, using their own set of criteria, whether they should stay or go. Simultaneously, employers are contemplating retention: How do they retain their most-needed, best-skilled, in-demand talent? What do their people want and need from the workplace? Are they equipped to honor those desires?

And do managers and employees know how to have real stay conversations?

### **Personalizing engagement**

Employee disengagement is one symptom of a worker’s dissatisfaction with their role and remains a workplace challenge. In his January 2022 Gallup article “U.S. Employee Engagement Drops for First Year in a Decade,” Jim Harter writes, “For the first year in more than a decade, the percentage of engaged workers in the U.S. declined in 2021. Just over one-third of employees (34%) were engaged, and 16% were actively disengaged in their work and workplace ... This compares with 36% engaged and 14% actively disengaged in 2020.”

## **What Is Engagement?**

Engagement can be defined as a three-pronged concept that:

- Describes a person’s emotional involvement in their work—the passion someone invests and the motivation they feel to do their job well
- Incorporates emotional and social needs, such as someone doing work they are good at and connecting their work with a higher purpose
- Produces employees who are involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work and workplace

Disengagement is costly, from lost productivity to the investment required to refill key roles. And managers have a big influence on engagement. Gallup’s “How Influential Is a Good Manager?” reveals that 70 percent of the variance in team engagement is determined solely by the manager.

As talent development professionals, we can help address the problem by reminding leaders—and ourselves—that engagement is personal. Each employee remains at a job for different reasons. It’s not enough to measure engagement through surveys and apps. Nor is it enough to promote sweeping engagement-focused programs based on the survey results. We can encourage leaders to have personal conversations with their persons, humane heart-to-hearts with their humans. Only then can organizations curate workplace experiences that encourage engagement and support retention.

### **Connecting career success and engagement**

People stay in jobs and commit to career paths that support their feelings of engagement (see sidebar). At its simplest, an engaging career is one in which an individual gets their needs met. Employees want career opportunities where their needs align with what the employer is offering and where what em-

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employees are offering meets that employer's needs. Workers are more likely to remain committed to organizations that actively ask about and nurture their holistic career success.

Simple, right? Does that solve the retention problem? No. As Tanya's example reveals, it's not easy for employees to define and communicate what they need. They may lack the self-awareness to describe their values and priorities. Or they may not have given themselves permission to voice their needs because of self-limiting beliefs. An employee's past jobs may have come easily to them, bypassing tougher reflections on "Do I feel a sense of purpose, or is this just another job?"

Likewise, as Marco's reaction reveals, it's just as challenging for leaders to ask questions that get to the heart of what engages their team members. Managers often lack the skills, practice, and accountability to have the conversations, falling prey to assumptions and naive optimism that their direct reports are doing fine.

It's time for skill-building—it's time to have a stay conversation grounded in career success. Career success comes from shared success between an individual and the organization—the employee and the employer. The organization needs what the employee has, and the employee's needs must align with what the organization provides. We can support that alignment and help uncover—and close—the gaps that prevent the shared success. A career success framework comprises the four factors of employee needs, the employee's offer, the organization's offer, and company needs.

## Employee needs

Let's begin with the individual's needs. Human motivation has long fascinated researchers. What makes people happy? Why do individuals do what they do? What inspires and drives them?

Abraham Maslow introduced his well-known hierarchy of needs in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation" and book *Motivation and Personality*. More than 60 years later, David Rock of the NeuroLeadership Institute presented a new model in his 2008 paper "SCARF: A Brain-Based Model for Collaborating with and Influencing Others." SCARF stands for

the five key domains that influence behavior in social situations, with themes similar to those Maslow presented:

- Status—our relative importance to others (alignment with need for esteem)
- Certainty—our ability to predict the future and make decisions accordingly
- Autonomy—our sense of control over events
- Relatedness—how safe we feel with others; our sense of connection/community
- Fairness—how fair and just we perceive exchanges between people to be

The model is based on neuroscience research that suggests social domains activate the same approach and avoidance responses in people's brains that individuals rely on for physical survival.

More recently, in *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Daniel Pink simplified motivation to three key intrinsic drivers, with strong echoes of Maslow and Rock: autonomy (a person's need to control what they do and how they do it), mastery (their desire to learn and improve), and purpose (the sense of their being connected to something larger).

Questions that we can encourage managers to ask to better understand their employees' motivations include:

- How do you like to receive appreciation and recognition?
- How do you describe your ideal workplace community?
- How do you connect with others and want others to connect with you?
- How is your work connected to your larger sense of purpose?
- When are you happiest at work? (What are you doing, how are you doing it, and with whom?)
- What is your ideal work environment?
- How do you like to engage with your manager?

To deepen our comfort with and understanding of those questions, we can role model by engaging in our own self-reflection. What have you asked yourself to better understand your own needs? And what questions have you appreciated from your best TD managers and most-memorable TD mentors?

**accountability to have stay conversations.**

## Employee's offer

Employers hire someone because that person's experience and expertise fit a role or project's requirements. That need for specific skills—the ones critical today and those that companies will need tomorrow—keeps leaders up at night. CEOs across industries worry about skills gaps in their organizations. In the Winter 2022 Fortune/Deloitte CEO Survey, the highest-ranked external issue predicted to influence or disrupt business strategy was a shortage of labor and skills.

Employees feel engaged when their leaders and organization understand, appreciate, and recognize their value proposition. Likewise, workers feel motivated when they have opportunities to do what they do best, use their strengths, and demonstrate their competence.

As part of career success coaching or your next performance management training, encourage employees to ask themselves these questions to better communicate their value:

- What are my strengths and capabilities?
- How are my strengths and capabilities being used (or not being used) in my role?
- What uniquely sets me apart as a professional—what is my personal brand?
- What have others said is my superpower?
- How do I add value to my role, team, and company?
- What am I willing to do that the organization hasn't asked me to do yet?
- What skills and abilities do I need or want to develop to deepen my mastery?

If a worker is struggling to answer those questions, suggest that they complete a strengths-based assessment, review past performance reviews, read their LinkedIn recommendations, or ask their friends and colleagues.

## Organization's offer

From total rewards to free snacks and from community-building events to curated shared spaces, employers spend vast sums of money enticing people to apply, join, and stick around. But one size doesn't fit all, and not every employee appreciates every benefit.

Career success depends on the individual's needs aligning with the organization's offer. If there's enough of a match, engagement is more likely to follow. But each person defines *enough* differently, and their tipping point is situational and uniquely theirs.

As representatives of their organizations, managers can ask these questions of their direct reports during the performance management process and, as appropriate, during regular touch-base conversations to explore the match and uncover gaps:

- What benefits are most appealing? Which do you most frequently use?
- What does the organization not offer that would make you feel more excited about work?
- How does your physical workspace support (or hinder) you from doing your best work?
- What materials or equipment do you need to do your work most effectively?
- How can the organization support your sense of belonging?

## Company needs

Organizations want their employees to stay, yes. But they also want staff to achieve goals, complete assigned tasks, take on new assignments, maintain (and deepen) their knowledge and skills, protect organizational assets, behave in alignment with norms and practices, and generally play nice with others. It's a delicate balance between the company's preference for compliance (do this by this time) and the individual's yearning for autonomy (OK, but I want to do it this way). And individuals are happiest at work when they get to do what they do best.

We can help leaders align their employees' individual offers with the larger organizational needs by suggesting they ask key questions such as:

- How much autonomy do you feel you have over what you do in your role and how you do it?
- How can you feel like you have optimal autonomy—what's one thing you would change or maintain about your current situation?
- What level of direction do you respond to most effectively? How do you ask for needed help?

## Facing Fears

Leaders may hold back from asking stay conversation questions because they fear the answers. What if my direct reports want more money, and there's no budget for raises? What if they want a promotion, but my hands are tied due to our organizational structure and internal equity? What if they are bored and want to challenge themselves with other tasks, but I really need them to stay right where they are?

Instead of being paralyzed by fear, managers should remain curious and explore what's behind the request. What really is driving the employee's need?

**Money.** Is the need for more money a request for acknowledgment, appreciation, and recognition? Could a spot bonus gift card or public praise for achievements meet the need? Managers should do their homework and work with the compensation team to identify (and correct) significant gaps to market. Not only will that help retain team members, but it also may attract future ones.

**Promotion.** Like money, this could be a worker's longing for esteem and status. Consider inviting the employee to meetings with executives, asking them to manage high-visibility projects, and including them in future-focused strategy discussions.

**Challenge.** Humans are motivated and inspired by learning and growth. What can managers remove from their team members' plates so they can take on challenging new assignments while still accomplishing the work critical to team success? Adults learn best on the job, so managers should uncover the win-win for the individual and the organization.

- How well do you understand the organization's expectations (for example, desired outcomes and success criteria)?
- What opportunities are there to better use your strengths and capabilities—in this role or in others?

### Reminders for stay conversations

Engagement influences retention, but engagement is personal and means something different to each employee (each person stays for different reasons). Through coaching and training initiatives, we must encourage and provide skill building to support stay conversations. The individual and organization must come together to spark engagement.

Employees must become more comfortable defining and communicating to their supervisor what they need from and what they can offer to their work and workplaces. Explain to staff that learning about themselves demands practice and patience. Likewise, sharing what they've learned requires vulnerability and courage. Both are critical to long-term professional satisfaction and career success.

At the same time, managers must become comfortable asking questions about their direct reports' individual motivations and career success. That may lead to tough conversations—at first (see sidebar). While managers may not be able to meet each team member's every need, managers shouldn't deny themselves the opportunity to find retention-supporting middle grounds.

### Make a difference

Let's rewind that conversation between Marco and Tanya. Imagine if Tanya knew she was motivated by mastery, continuing to develop her skills, and tackling new challenges. And imagine if Tanya had found the courage to express her concerns to Marco (because he had been nurturing a safe and open environment). Likewise, imagine if Marco regularly asked stay conversation questions during their weekly meetings and learned about Tanya's waning engagement early enough to take constructive action.

Just imagine.

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