



Digital Article / Difficult Conversations

How to Respond When an Employee Quits

It doesn't have to feel like the end of the world — or be the end of your relationship. *by Rebecca Zucker*

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With over four million people quitting their jobs each month during the first quarter of 2022 and 44% of workers currently looking for new jobs, it's entirely possible that someone on your team could leave in the near term. And it may not be the person you thought it would be — or hoped it would be. It could come as a total surprise to you and be a key contributor on your team, someone with whom you really enjoy

working and who has great potential in your organization. So, how do you respond when this person gives their notice?

While there are several things you should *not* do — like take it personally, belittle their new opportunity, or give them a guilt trip (among others) — there are six key elements to ensuring that you respond in a constructive and professional manner while processing the surprising news.

Take a beat

First, take a moment to digest the news. It's okay to show you're surprised or to say something like, "Wow, I wasn't expecting that." The last thing you want to do is react impulsively and say something you might regret that would leave the individual with a negative impression of you and the organization.

Notice and manage any in-the-moment reactions

During this momentary pause, take a breath and try to discern precisely what it is that you're feeling. Susan David, author of *Emotional Agility*, shares that namings our emotions is the first step in dealing with them. Try to be as specific as possible. In addition to being surprised, you may feel frustrated, discouraged, hurt, deflated, betrayed, angry, miffed, irked, or deeply disappointed or just plain sad. There are many subtle flavors of negative emotions, and parsing out the specific emotion you're feeling will help you create greater self-awareness and enable you to process your feelings more effectively and respond more constructively.

It's when we're not conscious of these negative emotions that they can unexpectedly emerge from below the surface, triggering unconstructive, reflexive comments or behaviors that you may later regret, such as lashing out or making a sarcastic jab or snide remark. It's ill advised

to share that you feel betrayed or angry, even if that's the case — here, discretion is the better part of valor. However, if you're sad or disappointed, it's okay to say, "I'm so sad you're leaving, but it sounds like a great opportunity. We're going to miss you."

Depersonalize the news

When we feel hurt or betrayed by such departures, it's because we take the news personally. Even if you could stand to improve as a manager (let's face it, we can all find ways in which we can do better), their departure is not a statement about your personal worth or how good you are as a person, so it's best to put your ego to the side and rise above any strong or harsh feelings you may have. The individual might be leaving for a better opportunity, better compensation, personal reasons, or all of the above. The best career development path for them may be to leave the organization and get experience elsewhere. It is their career, so respect that they made the best choice for themselves, their career, and/or their family, which is the same anyone would expect you to do for yourself. They are showing loyalty to themselves — *not* disloyalty to you.

Be curious and show a growth mindset

Show genuine interest and curiosity to learn why they're leaving and what they're going to do next. What can you learn that would benefit you, the organization, and other employees for the future? You might ask, "What could we do to entice you to stay?" At that point in time, the answer may be nothing since they've likely accepted another position. But one client of mine let her boss know, when giving her notice, that a competitor was willing to bring her on at a more senior level with much higher compensation — something her organization had been dragging their feet on and had been noncommittal about for quite some time. Unexpectedly, within a few days, they came back with an even better offer that ultimately did convince her to stay.

While this scenario might be the exception, it's still important to ask the question above, which might also be phrased as, "What else could we have done to keep you?" or "What appeals to you or excites you most about this new job?" Their response may be related to better work/life balance, the ability to work remotely, a more inclusive culture, a new and exciting challenge with more responsibility, or being more empowered to make decisions. This is all useful feedback for you and the organization so that these areas can be addressed for remaining and future employees, even if it's too late to do anything about it for this individual.

Show your support

Maintaining positive working relationships with departing employees is important, well beyond the time that you actually work together, so show your support for their decision and enable them to leave on a good note. After all, *you* may need a positive reference from *them* one day.

Further, as a former employee, they are still a brand ambassador for the company and may be a future customer, client, or referral source for business and other employees. And by showing support and enthusiasm for their new opportunity, as disappointed as you may be, you are more likely to keep the door open for them to potentially return to the organization one day. So, celebrate their contributions and next endeavor, and ask them how you can be helpful to them as they start their new role.

Ask for what you need

When an individual gives notice, they likely have a desired end date in mind. After all, they will want to take a break before diving into a new job. Get alignment on what they need and what you need from them before they leave to ensure a smooth transition. It may involve some give and take and could include finishing a specific project or set

of tasks, training others to take over these responsibilities to minimize disruption, or even hiring their replacement.

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Someone giving notice doesn't have to be the end of the world or the end of a relationship. As surprised as you may be, using the six strategies above can help you respond in a constructive way that builds the relationship and helps all parties move on in a positive way.

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